

From Out of the Midnight Library

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
with research distinction in Creative Writing in the undergraduate
colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Ian Moeckel

The Ohio State University

April 2013

Project Advisor: Manny Martinez, Department of English

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Preface: Finding and Loving a Respect for Perspective

You know those existential crises that make you question everything about what is real in the world and what isn't? Well, you can look at this collection as one of those. It consists of alternating nonfiction essays and short stories, and represents my work from the last two years.

I'm a thinker. For my first year or so at Ohio State, I rotted in the psychology major beneath the weight of the scientific method, finding it impossible to explore the mind so academically. I'd write down ideas for stories and turns of phrase in the margins of my Abnormal Psychology book, or work out elaborate metaphors that I was sure would keep me level, free me from stress. But my thoughts fizzled, accumulating as nothing more than a series of bullet points, each of which I swore to come back to eventually, typed into a nineteen page Microsoft Word document labeled "Stuff.doc."

Then I found fiction.

I immediately fell in love with this means of expressing what was inside me. But soon there was retaliation. The second short story I ever wrote consumed me, left me falling into the story world and my protagonist's—a projection of myself—inner turmoil. I worked on it constantly and it grew into a bed sore at the nape of my neck, eating its way to the spinal cord. At the time I'd been kicked out of the living arrangement for next year's apartment, so my roommates and I weren't on the most talkative of terms. It is a strange moment to be lying in bed, tracing back through classes and meals, trying to find out if it's really possible that you hadn't spoken to one person all day.

One night after working on my story in silence for as long as I could muster—maybe an hour—I felt myself brush up against the side of insanity. I sat in the dark, trying so hard not to be depressed. I knew “trying” to let go of everything wouldn’t help because trying isn’t letting go, that’s wriggling in the quicksand. I was in the dark, with rain freezing outside on the windows, trying to count my breaths. I had to keep telling myself that I was not my protagonist, I couldn’t follow his path. I had to be rid of this death-anxiety, in the dark attic, but there were only words.

That night was terrifying, as if I had run out of context.

During that period I never saw nonfiction as being very important, having once asked my friend what the hell you write about in nonfiction anyways. He’d said, “Anything you want.” It wasn’t that I didn’t believe him, I just believed him in the sense that I believed my mom when she said I could grow up to be whatever I wanted.

After reading David Foster Wallace in my narrative theory class, my eyes were opened to what nonfiction could do. I realized that it wasn’t the events we were reading, but the person themselves—how they think and the voice they think it in.

I began reading, and writing, and thinking, and experimenting. I loved it. No longer was I forced to funnel everything inside of me into a single narrative. Instead of the boundaries of fiction being completely invisible, blurry outlines came into view that I could trip over and then realize that they were there. I felt like I could breathe. I realized that not all truths were meant to come from fiction. In this way, nonfiction was the hand that pulled me out of the water as I drowned, back into the context of the real world. Perhaps it is this respect for genre boundaries that caused me to wonder what was wrong with them.

The true/untrue distinction I saw as being unsatisfactory because of the obvious fact that the author can make things up. Yet somehow, all the way down to the prose, the two genres were fundamentally different. In what sense? I wasn't sure. I was only sure that we constructed these terms as fail-safes in the world of literature as definitions of truth and untruth.

I started wondering where in the mind nonfiction stopped—at thoughts, or dreams, or ideas and dramatizations. I wondered why it was that the noose of narrative is so tight on a short story but slackened on an essay. Where does real end and unreal begin?

For a long time, I have been writing this piece without knowing it. It began in the fetal position in the dark on my bed—the crystalizing of a question so amorphous that it bordered on delusional. I rocked myself to sleep in the dark, waiting on the dawn of perspective.

Life at the SEL

I'm a person who doesn't smile very much; I write a lot, and I tend to be thoughtful. I somehow feel that it is these attributes that have always allowed me to find the solitude and solemnness of the Science and Engineering Library to be a nice place to escape to. I use it to escape roommates, bars, parties, group hangouts, etc., and I use it often. Tonight, for instance, I shuffled through my densely packed living room, stepping over the cords of N64 controllers and telling my roommates I'd be at the library for the night. Other than a few uninspired calls of "You know you want to drink," there wasn't much surprise or caring.

I do this often enough that the building has become a part of how people see me—it and the stories I have from it. I see these stories I tell as having little gems of truth that say more about me than even my one-on-one interactions with the friends I tell them to. A lot of times I don't feel like I'm being myself around my friends, so I figure, why not take things that happen when I am comfortable and just tell them about it? When I finally come home for the night and throw down my book bag, I'll have already begun to form in my head the manner in which I'll tell my roommate(s) how I made friends with the security guard, and I'll have decided how really, being pals with the night shift at the library is more inherently depressing than it is exciting that I have a new friend.

I think truth makes a good story. It is what I search for in the copious amounts of writing I do here. It's hard to say what kind of truth I'm going to try and show you now. I can't put it into words—what I want to show you. At least, I haven't put it into words yet. What type of truth I'm looking for now, I'm not yet sure. But hopefully we'll find something out by the end of it.

The table beneath me is smooth, its width scattered with a folders, papers, an anthology of non-fiction essays 1970 to present, a note-ridden handout and an open ringed notebook. The tables are set horizontally next to each other, jutting out two-strong from the wall, and they stretch like rungs out in front of me hundreds of feet to the end of the room. The seats are sparsely occupied now on a Friday evening, mostly by Asians or Indians—a cluster collectively forming the “Library Races,” a group I construct reluctantly and with a pang of racism in my conscience—but I do it anyways.

I feel as if the SEL should have its own smell and I’ll bet it once did (maybe something like mahogany mixed with the sweet plastic smell of a new classroom), but the neurons in my brain that control habituation have forgotten it a long time ago. Instead I smell my hand, which is supporting my face—“soap,” I smell—not hand washing soap which only smells like the chemicals that make it, but body wash specifically engineered to please me. I breathe in its bluish sweetness a few times before sliding out my laptop. Catching my reflection in its black, reflective face, I notice my hair. I always notice my hair. After fixing the blonde, wavy spike things that I care so much about, and pretending that they will stay oriented just as I left them, forever and ever (or at least until the next time I see my reflection and re-do my hair), I end the computer’s naptime and Ctrl+N a new Microsoft Word doc.

So now, at the SEL, in front of my laptop, I am writing, and I still want to show you something, but I don’t know how and I’m not sure what. I am acutely aware of how cliché it is to write about how hard it is to come up with something to write, and my mind’s rusted gears click and grind in an attempt to churn out something for me to write about.

Okay, I’ve got something.

It seems as if I feel that sharing every thought with you, being as honest as I can, is the right way to get you into my head. When I write nonfiction, we're very close you and I. As "The writer at the desk," I've got to be frank with you, take you by the hand, and forage ahead through some problem. Unconsciously, I can feel you grasping my hand as I lower you into the cockpit, right here next to me in the machine.

But that's bullshit. That isn't what I'm actually doing.

Now, I frown as I gaze into the droning computer screen. Thoughts of the dissociation between brain and page blink eternally in my mind's eye just as the cursor blinks in front of me—waiting for words, just waiting for words.

Yeah, no one thinks like that. My inner monologue would be more like, "Computer," which sounds retarded.

When I move to write what I'm thinking, I'm doing it with a desired effect—namely, to not sound retarded. As I desire this effect, you, the reader, enter the equation and become stuffed between me and the page, and my thoughts become discontinuous. How can I really key you into my inner-most self when I'm having all of these thoughts about prose that I hide from the page?

Then again, it's not as if the type of writing I'm doing right now, pure and un-descriptive—just free ballin' it (not literally though, I fear change and thus I fear the lack of underwear. I have gone 21 years in underpants for a reason [I assume... God dammit, I've gone and trapped myself in sentence break, parentheses, and brackets. I can feel the point oozing off my prose, dripping down and collecting into lonely puddles on the taskbar {Why the hell do I have so many Word documents open?}.], and changing now would be a slap to the face of all past-Ians and their wise decision making.)—is what is actually happening in my brain.

My mind doesn't solely operate through language. Right now, I feel the horizontal ridges of the J and F keys beneath the pads of my pointer fingers, as well as the semi-weightlessness of creativity floating in my stomach as I write, but I am also heavy with a looming sense of anxiety. And my fear that my roommates are at home now watching Game of Thrones and tipping back Natty Lites, bonding and leaving me out of the group, is not spoken in monologue. But that fear affects how I think, the decisions I make, and how I see the computer screen in front of me. It affects whether I see the un-crowdedness of the library as a comfortable working environment or as a sign to leave.

So because there are these non-language effects, I must accept that anything I write is just a representation. Ultimately, a design of my mind is impossible to convey. I can't take you with me in my mind, so please exit the cockpit.

See, this is the type of shit that swirls around in my head when I sit here by myself—here at this desk, in this spot, with my laptop and the outlet from which it draws power, my top plug of the outlet's two because the bottom one makes me feel less productive. But saying that I'm here by myself is misleading because when you're here as much as I am, you start to recognize fellow SEL-ers. And here in the quiet of the SEL, much like the characters I create for my fiction, they develop a sort of personality. So really, I do know people. Some I like and some I don't, but my favorite SEL-er, if I had to pick a best friend out of any one of these people I haven't quite met, is a kid I call "Cute Asian."

He's over six feet tall and has one of the fullest bellies I've ever seen. I wouldn't call it fat, I'd call it round. It just looks like his stomach was destined to be like that, and it would be unnatural to see it otherwise—like how there's no such thing as a skinny panda ("Panda Boy" is another favored nickname). Don't ask me why but one of the first thoughts I had when I saw him

was, “I have got to see this kid with his shirt off.” Glasses sit atop his full face, and with his head constantly cocked up at an angle, he just looks so curious. I think that’s what makes him so adorable.

When I first met him (by “met” I mean, “watched religiously any time he was visible from my seat”), I got the sense that he was not necessarily a reject among the other Asians, but maybe an eccentric, whose belly and personality quirks were more a part of the group than he was. He would often appear silently behind an apparent friend and stare down at them for up to a minute without them noticing, his belly a silent companion, large and floating next to their head. When turning around, they’d jump at his presence with a look of genuine fear. Sometimes he’d stand there for an allotted period of time, and if he wasn’t noticed or acknowledged, he’d simply pick his head back up into the air and move on.

I have so many stories I could tell about him, about how he farts in the library and sometimes burps and sometimes squawks. (He’s actually sitting directly behind me right now in one of the second floor’s comfy chair. He’s wearing a sky blue shirt that squeezes tight around his stomach, and khaki shorts that stop above his knees so that his thick, full, healthy calves are visible before they disappear into his shin-high socks. I just heard him breathe.) When I’m sitting here writing, I feel a strange kinship with Panda Boy. I assume we both have similarly high grade point averages because of the large amounts of time we put in. I assume he knows who I am, and has ideas about me as well. I’ve spent all-nighters here when he was the only other one present—stretching and yawning as he meandered, circling the floor for a bit of a break. Just the two of us.

But sitting here now, I can’t help but wonder. Wonder if maybe my assumptions are wrong. Wonder whether he’s ever told his friends about me, or pointed me out from across the

room as that one kid who (insert idiosyncrasy). I wonder if he actually knows I exist. He might not.

Until I go up and talk to him, I can't in good conscience, say that we're friends.

But it's not all like that I suppose. I do more than just lurk in the shadows, watching the behaviors of certain round individuals. I do interact with people here. In my early time at the university I came with my sister, and my roommate from freshman year will text me if he's ever in here. I even found romance at the SEL. It was with a girl who spent just as much time here as I did, who was pretty and funny and most importantly, sort of seemed to like me, and was sort of like me. We began to sit together when we'd see each other and this lead to her phone number which lead to study dates. I remember her leaning on the white tabletops as she stared at her computer, scrunching up her hair and holding it when she was frustrated, like that handful were responsible for the existence of homework and hard decisions, and I liked that. She was, like, real. Stressed and thoughtful and intricate and dedicated.

I'm going to talk about her laugh now and I don't care if it is a cliché; her laugh was beautiful.

When she laughed it was uncontrollable. It sounded like it came from somewhere guttural, deeper than her voice box. Each step came out stuttered like it couldn't get out fast enough. Her face got red and she couldn't help it. It was deep, and it was the prettiest thing about her.

Predictably, this would happen at the most crowded moments and I would eventually notice everyone else on the quiet floor staring us down in contempt. Even though one of my top priorities in life was obeying and carrying out library law and order, I didn't give a shit. I had seen identical instances of other people being loud and obnoxious when I was by myself. I'd

fucking hate their self-appointed superiority, somehow better and above people trying to work because they weren't taking it seriously. I knew that we were doing the same thing. Then, she'd laugh even harder. I'd laugh even harder. Not a lot of people can make me forget my library etiquette. It was nice to forget my library etiquette.

One time we were sitting across from each other and I stole her kicked-off shoes without her noticing. Sliding down in her chair, she bit her lip and all of a sudden I could feel these things poking around my ankles. Trying to take off and steal my shoes as vengeance, she fumbled around down there for a while, while I laughed and continued to do homework. When I say "continued to do homework" I mean, "pretended to do homework while my mind was entirely in my feet, just feeling her touch." She gave up eventually and we sat for an hour with our feet tangled beneath the desk, she using mine as a recliner.

By the time I walked her home every night and looked at the reflection of us walking as we passed the glass wall of the Wexner Center, I'd realize that everything with her was easy.

She changed how I looked at the library, and no one had ever done that before. It ceased being a safe-house in which I wrote to avoid social interaction. Instead, it grew to be the place where I lived with someone else. What became important was her, not just writing or avoiding social screw-ups.

But, then again, that's not the whole truth. It was not all as easy as I made it sound, but it was nice, just then, to feel the good parts. In reality, every time before she arrived I'd hardly be able to concentrate and I felt uncertain—uncertain if she liked me, if I'd be funny, if she liked one of the other four or five boys I'd see her sit with before we started going together, if she'd sit on the same side of the table as me, if I should try and touch her on her hand or on her shoulder. Her laugh became like a drug for me. I'd hear it when she read her text messages and I'd wonder

who she was talking to, and her “fake laugh”—the one she was in control of, that she did out of politeness, the one I may have just received—felt sour as I watched her and the smile that she couldn’t keep off her face if she tried, eyes down on the screen. I didn’t want to tell you that because that would have made it feel impure, just as it does now as I remember it—tainted by thoughts of her boyfriend who I suspected she was texting.

Did I not mention she had a boyfriend?

(Of course I know I didn’t mention it. I would be quite a shitty author if I had no idea what was in my own essay.)

I was not privy to this until after we had been texting every day, and until after she had slept in my bed. Things changed after I found out. When I was alone, the SEL turned into this perverted place of quiet frustration. Writing was horrible. The doubts, what-ifs, and the seemingly-distant good memories of her, would stuff themselves between the sentences of anything I’d try to write. It was all so quiet.

This was bullshit but I got dragged along/dragged myself along, tumbling through months of loneliness and being in second place, waiting for the times I’d get to be with her at the SEL, or waiting for us to get drunk so she could “make a mistake,” and I could forget for a second that she would never actually end up being with me.

I put quotes around “make a mistake,” but to be fair, she never said that. And maybe she didn’t believe it either. But when the only time you allow someone to come over or kiss you or hold you is when you’re hammered off of large quantities of Smirnoff, it’s hard not to put those words in your mouth, or at least feel like a mistake.

But still, I don’t think she did believe that.

I was certainly to blame as well. I could have left any time I wanted, but I didn't for far too long. I didn't believe that we could, just, end. I think had I spent more time outside of my own head during my life, I might have better understood how unhealthy this was.

But finally, after months and months of this, I stopped talking to her altogether.

In the divorce she got the fourth floor and I got the second, so I never have to see her anymore. I chose this route in hopes that equilibrium and certainty could return to me, my thoughts, and my library. Now, apart from those daily moments in the lobby or stairwell, when my heartbeat quickens, and I fumble through the lines in my head of what I'd say if I opened the door to find her standing there, I suppose that it has.

Now, all the way across the room and down a long aisle between two bookshelves, I can see where she and I sat our second-to-last time together. No one sits in our chairs but there's a kid in an orange hoodie completely passed out next to them. And down that aisle of shelves there is a giant window that stretches to the ceiling. In the greyish tint of pre storm overcast, an adolescent treetop sways partially out of frame and then returns, straight up again, coming to rest as the only thing in my vision.

I turn back to the computer screen, typing, watching the pencil in the bottom of the screen work across the digital book until I stop typing and a giant red "X" appears in place of the pencil, and I have a thought. It seems as if this essay is revolving around the experience of me currently writing the essay, but this poses a problem. I will not have written this entire thing in one sitting. Ideally, the writing persona exists in some closed off matrix-like world where there is no time and all that happens is my fingers hit keys—it can dip and nod between paragraphs and months and days, and anything they type will transfer from the matrix-world into the section of the essay

and will have truthfully occurred in that time. But, of course, I don't live in that world. My persona lives in the SEL.

I sit with my finger pads once again feeling the ridges on the F and J keys, typing from the same persona who earlier scanned the tables of the sparsely occupied library and smelled the body-wash on my knuckles, and the same persona who will experience the final scene of the essay. When I tell the ending, since it is in-scene from the “currently-writing perspective,” it's going to feel as if I had finished writing the essay the moment it occurred, but that's not true. That was like month ago. So is it lying to you to come back into this persona and make it seem like this all happening fluidly?

—Hold on—

The sound of the loud speaker cracks through my rubber insulated ear buds and I pop them out to hear the announcement. This is strange for eight o'clock on a Friday. Normally announcements only come at eleven thirty-five, telling all SEL patrons who are not OSU students to depart the library and for students to get out their BuckIDs to make identification easy for the security guards on their first round. This is normally said in a low and creeping voice—that of perhaps a thirty five year old man who has sat in a corridor in the basement for years and years, once a day getting day-old bagels and iced TBC mochas thrown down at him from the Terra-Byte café—so consistent, in fact, that for a while I thought it was a recording. That's how you can spot SEL rookies: if they still laugh at it when they hear him.

“Attention all SEL patrons, would everybody please move to the basement of the SEL. All patrons should move to the basement of the SEL. Thank you.” This has never happened before. A thought seems to prick mine and everyone else's mind at the same time: Do I actually have to do this? Am I allowed to just say “Uh, fuck you” and go home? But a certain tickle

swirls around inside me. It's like I can feel another SEL-story taking shape for me to tell in the future, another addition to my amusing and idiosyncratic public relationship with this library. So I move to the basement.

Apparently not everyone shares my enthusiasm for library drama, as I am one of the first down there. This idea is reinforced by the second message which marked by the not-fucking-around precursor of "I REPEAT," and then, "All patrons leave your floors and move to the basement. A tornado warning has been issued for the area. All patrons to the basement."

As the five floors of people begin to file in and fill the area, I think about how lucky it is that this happened on a Friday—the first of spring quarter, which is probably the least likely day of the calendar year for people to be at the library. Or perhaps it is unlucky, I can just imagine the scene if this were a Tuesday night: homework lost in the mass of social buzzing, cliques forming with rebels sitting on the tables, the feeling of a strange power of independence and the creation of a society. But this is interesting too.

On a day like this, an oddly high proportion of people are adults—i.e. people who don't have kegs to be standing or bars to be crawling. I quietly hope that the warning lasts until eleven thirty because I think it would be funny to see the security guards having to apprehend the hobos who sleep away hours here and play computer games, and toss them out into the tornado as we all pray that the tornado gods have a taste for hobo blood. One of them—a man whom it would be difficult to toss anywhere—I currently have my eye on, he's a regular. He's a large man with a frumpy ring of hair that horseshoes around the back of his head and falls into a bristled eleven-o'clock-tomorrow-shadow on his face. His lower lip is swollen and hanging at least an inch from the upper one. The glasses he wears are thick and through their fermented, yellowed lenses, his eyes bulge in a state of sedated surprise. His hairy stomach hangs below the dirty, red polo

stretched around his torso like a sheet. Everything about him looks stained, as if the hardships of 60 odd years of life have dirtily collected on his skin and clothes in some implicit and unwashable manner. I imagine his name is Harold or Frank. But really, I have no idea what his story is.

I am denied my wish of hobo sacrifice and the warning ends within twenty minutes. I file out with the first wave of people and walk outside to get a sense of the storm. I love the rain. I love it so fucking much, and I love storms. The water forms halos of light as it passes the lampposts in the darkened courtyard, and roars as it smacks against the infinite leaves of the scattered trees. I decide that this was a good story for me. That in it there is some deep and ironic meaning I can convey to others about my trapped connection with this great place.

It's still relatively early—before nine. Early enough that I could walk back right now and spend the night drinking with Trevor, Jack, and Justin. I look out into the darkness, and feel the droplets on my face from the air being whipped around under the stone overhang.

I imagine squeezing the moment out of this as much as possible before I lose it, before the truth creeps away from me and I lose it forever. But standing here, in the violent cold of the rain, the prospect of jogging up the stairs, returning to my seat, and flipping up the laptop to awake it from its nap, I fear more than anything.

Say It.

Inside the Cafeteria, shadowless light drenched the plastic chairs and linoleum-crusted tables which lay scattered across the floor. The air was thick with decay, condensing and dampening the eyebrow hairs that collected in the corners instead of dust.

John had backed into a wall and fallen beneath Charlie, who himself could barely stand on his crooked knees and hunching body. John could hear the ceiling, chairs, tables, and windowless walls echo the whispers of Charlie's failing breath as he prepared to speak, and tell John that he could not starve forever.

A series of sobering headaches tugged John back to consciousness as he shook his head from side to side. He was still safe, still leaning over the sink in his dorm room.

The daydreams were nothing new. Long ago the doctor had told him that while frightening, these were no more than an overactive imagination. "Abnormal, yes, but they don't seem to affect your everyday functioning. At least you don't have night terrors," the doctor had said. "Screaming and howling. Yes, quite a fear they must experience." John wouldn't quite call them hallucinations. Hallucinations implied that he was crazy, but everyone had dreams. Everybody had places their minds went. It was like a default setting for his brain to fall into sometimes: like how his eyes would float to any mildly exposed breasts or the butt of a passing guy when he was zoning out in the library. The past few weeks, John had considered calling the campus counseling service about the daydreams, but he figured it was best to just ignore them. He sounded like an idiot when he tried to describe them anyways. The specifics slipped his memory a lot of the time, same as any dream. All that was left was a feeling, an inclination.

John took away the glance he'd been sustaining in the mirror, and then leaned his back against the wall with his eyes closed, trying to let the solace of being alone in his dorm room wash over him. But his heart continued to expand with anxiety every time he thought about the party later that night. He had to stop thinking about it. Make a decision. One or the other. Jamie or Kate. Firstly, he didn't want to have to explain his sexual preferences to either of them for sheer embarrassment, and secondly, he wouldn't even know what to say. John thought of himself as neither gay, nor straight, nor bi. He figured, how could a person "go both ways" if in reality he'd never really gone either way?

Being a virgin was never really a confidence-booster when it came to social interaction. Conversations with Jamie were difficult because John had never really been close with someone so "cool" before. It was too surreal to be in the moment with Jamie—the alpha-male. This was similar to Kate, whose thick blue eyes were like some work of art that constantly analyzed him instead of the other way around. John always had to impress, always had to put on a show.

But he knew he was just fooling himself by trying to "decide" between Kate and Jamie, as if it were in his control. He wasn't going to make out with one of them tonight, or get laid, or end up goin' steady. This was all just hypothetical—something to try and trick himself into thinking he was confident.

"Hey," Anthony said, popping into the doorway and slamming the breaks on John's thought train. "You going to let any lucky tigers or tigresses get a piece of meat tonight?" This, of course, was a joke. Anthony never got on his case about being a virgin or anything—he was a good guy.

Anthony was the only person he could play the news up to who would get the fact that he was obviously being sarcastic. “Well,” John said, trying to suppress a smile, “let’s just say Ol’ Johnny Antelope Carcass has got a couple of options on the hook for tonight.”

“First, it’s probably not a good idea to go lion-hunting with a fishing rod. Second, what do you mean by ‘a couple’?” Anthony raised his eyebrow.

“I’m sort of supposed to meet Jamie and Kate at this party tonight.”

“Awe,” Anthony put his hand on John’s shoulder. “A first date and inviting two people to the same dance? You’re like the entire first season of a crappy teen sitcom,” he said, to which John replied with laughter. Honestly, John didn’t really invite them both to the same party. See, Kate was in his psychology class. They sat near each other, and always ended up together in the turn-to-your-partner activities. They talked every day, but John was still surprised when she asked what he was doing tonight, and told him about the kegger on sixteenth. John suspected that it was the type of situation where you get your little brother drunk for the first time, just because you’re curious how the little bugger will act. And usually it’s pretty funny.

The Jamie situation came from a stroke of residual bravado in the class right after psychology. John was on one of those rare little clouds of confidence where he spoke without thinking, and he invited Jamie to come by, or bring some friends if he wanted to.

So now, at this point, he was just trying to figure out why the fuck he had done that.

“It’s not like they like me or anything.”

“Eh,” Anthony whined, “Fuck ‘em if they don’t.”

John nodded. Advice of that nature was like a virus John was immune to. The antibodies in his brain ate it up and spit it out, chortling at the idea that John could ever think in such absolutes.

Before heading out the door they took two shots each of good old Uncle Orlof—the cheapest, shittiest vodka money could buy. Anthony had decided to tag along, which John was quietly, extremely thankful for. Being Anthony’s roommate, John got the pleasure of observing him every single day—his gloriously grunge clothes, and projection of carelessness under his bed head and headphones, even though anyone who’d met him knew his sharp tongue was wet with teen angst and wit. Anthony’s blood dripped flannel for sure.

John would contemplate for long periods of time why it was that he could talk to Anthony with some comfort, but his thoughts tended to zig-zag away from him and end up in much worse places. He hadn’t found an answer yet.

No one ever really noticed the buildings on a college campus that size; they were just another part of the landscape, passing by at a glacial rate, which made walking feel eerily similar to being on a treadmill. But John had been around enough to know that he’d eventually get where he was going, trusting in the tiny pebbles and blades of grass which moved by as he passed.

He was still thinking through how he’d perform at the party. John knew he was funny. Or, at least, he knew he was witty, on occasion. “Funny” implied actually making people laugh—which he did, if presented with the right situation. Accepting that sometimes John was his own biggest enemy, was important. This allowed him to remember that his confidence and funniness weren’t up to other people, and that they had no power over him—he could be in control.

“I can be in control.” John repeated it under his breath.

If he could keep himself from being so anxious all the time, then his real personality would be able to shine through.

A trick that he used sometimes was finding instances that made him comfortable, so that he could try and copy that feeling. His feet settled back into their pace and the scratchy steps droned like a heartbeat, giving a tempo as John's brain folded in on itself for the remainder of the walk.

A few days ago John had been sitting alone at the library. He'd had to read a chapter on stress disorders, fill out a rhetoric worksheet looking for patterns and thematic strands in an excerpt of *Frankenstein*, and write a philosophy paper that was due in about a week.

Looking across the vast room of scattered tables on the second floor, John saw the ocean of shared isolation. A place where it was socially acceptable to disappear inside oneself. Everyone looked like they were working. Everyone looked alone, just like he was. He looked back down to his white notebook which clashed against the mahogany veins of the otherwise empty table.

But, god dammit. That was right. He'd had to pee.

For a few years, John hadn't been able to pee in public. His success rate oscillated over time, with constant mental wars going on—trying to not think about it, and then thinking about it too much. It wasn't a guarantee he would fail, but the odds were never great.

Upon entering the bathroom and seeing all of the people squished into the small space, his morale started dripping out of him like sweat. Two people at the sink, another at the full-body mirror, two stalls full, and the urinal was wide open. The door had already closed behind him and he couldn't just walk away, so he took position at the urinal. Below him a shoe of the person in

the narrow stall peeked out from the divider. It accused him. Its bunny-eared shoelaces could hear the lack of splash in the little basin of water, or spatter against the urinal puck. His bladder stung, screaming at him to get this stuff out of his body. But all John could do was stand and wait, breathing in the stagnant scent of porcelain and pipe water.

Counting the sounds of air whooshing with each swing of the door, John knew that he and the shoe's owner in the stall were the only two left. He considered making a dash for the open stall, but then heard the torrent of flushing water next to him. A whimper of relief and frustration escaped John's mouth, so close to just being alone. The shoes shifted, standing up the body of their owner, and then turned, with two *claps*, stepping on John's shoelaces.

"The fuck," John said. He zipped up over his full bladder, and turned to pull his shoelace out from the foot. Before kicking, the wall caught his eye, and he saw that the blue-grey bricks now crept seamlessly across the space where the door had previously been.

Through the full body mirror, the open stall door next to him was visible, and inside, a man looking out. His feet still trapped John's shoelace beneath the divider, but John could see the man's midriff contorting itself so that he could look through the stall door.

John kicked out for real this time and took an instinctual step towards the place of the old door. Now, slouched in the corner was a quivering likeness of a human being. Its skin barely held onto the skeleton. Its jaw hung nearly free of the face, swinging below a sheet of hair that fell from his eyebrows. A bib with red blotches was hung around his neck, "Charlie" stitched into it in lower-case letters.

Back in the mirror, the man walked its legs sideways, body forward, out of the stall, face always in the mirror. Turning the corner, all John saw was its contorted reflection in the mirror, crab walking towards him.

*

John shook free from the daydream with more trouble than usual. Something about coming to school had made them different. It used to be that every once in a while he'd remember a detail or two which might allow him to vaguely backtrack into what it had been about. Normally they rotated, from driving off an unfinished bridge to being naked at the food court of the Oakbury Mall. But these ones were specific. They were harder to snap out of, and left him feeling as if he'd just been informed of the death of his close friend or mother.

He made an effort to quiet his breath as a view of the party began to present itself through the trees that he and Anthony walked through. Red, blue, and yellow lights flashed inside the party, but from where John was standing outside, it was a live aura coming from the house, changing colors as it breathed. Symbiotic college kids swirled around the fringe of its body like visual white noise on a television. John could guess the theme: everyone was looking for a girl, everyone was looking for a keg, and everyone was looking for the girl who had found the keg a little too much. And there she was—Kate—doing a keg-stand.

Her lips were wrapped around the tap like it was a lover and she sucked down hard. Her legs were spread wide open with colonies of male fingers wrapped tightly around them, wriggling closer to the apex. The tap gave her twenty-two seconds worth of liquid—a ton for a girl. She shook her legs, signifying the end of the keg-stand. Her yellow sundress tumbled up a little more with each kick, revealing inches more of her smooth, tanned, athletic legs. She stuck the landing and her head lulled to the side with chipmunked cheeks, rhythmically bobbing her head to the left a little more with each swallow until her mouth was empty. Kate had a white smile and her drunken eyes rolled down to the ground, arms crossed and looking humble for her own sake. The trees John was sulking near did a poor job of concealing him as she almost

immediately set her eyes on him, and he could see his reckless heartbeat reflected in them from twenty feet away.

“Johnny!” she yelled. Her smile was even bigger and more beautiful than before because it was directed at him, and he was smacked with cold sweat. She ran with purpose, flip-flops flipping, and then jumped on top of him. The parts of her skin that touched him were warm and tanned. Her breasts applied pressure on his chest. Every hair on his body prickled up like the lawn grass they were standing on. She slid down John like a fireman’s pole, and then looked down at her index finger which had been splashed with Keystone.

“We need to get you drunk,” Kate said, “Here.” She slid her finger past his lips and into his mouth. The moist skin tasted delicious because it was on his tongue, and John immediately knew her fingerprint.

“Thirsty,” she observed, “Come inside.”

He wanted to acknowledge the pun she had walked into, but when he turned, he saw that Anthony was chuckling inaudibly to himself and backing away without saying anything.

Where the fuck was he going?

Anthony motioned to for John to keep talking and John glared at him as he backed through a crowd of people and disappeared.

“Let’s do it,” John said to Kate. But as he let her take his hand and lead him away from the lawn, he couldn’t help but feel that he shouldn’t have come at all.

Inside the house’s mouth, everything seemed dank with beer and body fluid. The bacterial peers were mealy and multiplying, pushed crotch to ass, and a messy dissonance of words spilled with disturbing ease: there was talk left, talk right, talk up the stairs, talk down the

hall, talk the people who looked so attractive, talk from everyone so comfortable they were worn-in sofas, talk from those sofas, *talk*—John shook his head.

He'd cling to alcohol for subject matter: funny subject, good for sarcasm—like getting introduced to a drunk person and when they try to say their name, saying *Oh, you're Sober right?* Like, as if “Sober” was their name, and being sarcastic about them being drunk—well, sort of funny.

They had stopped walking and suddenly John could feel the dark silence hovering over him and Kate like a cartoon raincloud.

“So you're sober right?” John said. Fuck—he ruined it. He didn't know if she knew that he watched her do the keg-stand. That was the key to the joke: that she was obviously not sober, haha.

“Actually,” she said, fiddling with her hair, “I am sober as a skunk.”

His mind clambered in the wake of his awkward, mute response, trying to remember the context of what Kate had just said.

“Are you sure you aren't drunk as a bird?”

Kate nodded her head absentmindedly. “What?”

“Uh,” he responded, “nothing.”

Kate nodded and John watched her shift her weight from one hip to the other and then cross her arms as she looked around the party. The taste of her finger that he had been savoring turned sour on him. He looked around the party too but couldn't escape the bile-like tang that told him he wasn't allowed to taste things that good.

Then a slow laugh came from Kate, and she shook her head to herself, apparently just now getting his joke. “You’re funny,” she said, looking at him as if she were trying to solve a puzzle. “Funnier than you think.”

“Everything’s funny when you’re drunk,” he said. Quickly, he smiled to show he wasn’t trying to shit on the compliment.

“But I’m sober, remember?” she said. “Come on, I’ve got something to show you.”

Kate grabbed him by the arm. Every time she pushed through a cluster of the buzzing bees and they tried to collapse back onto the link of her arm and his, he didn’t know whether to be frightened or relieved—his grip loosened. The further they walked, the more his momentum fell. He was so fucking inconsistent; there was no way he could maintain this façade. He looked down to the two fingers with blue-painted nails that remained hooked to his hand. But she continued to push through the people who passed by like haggard road signs stacked on top of each other.

John was on the lookout for Jamie, and his grasp loosened again. The room flooded with blue light, and the air sat heavily on the tall coat-rack, long speakers, and erect columns of the house—all of which scowled at him with betrayal until he finally lost the grip and watched her body vaporize into the mess.

Everyone had a smell, their own signature. Jamie’s was like a mixture between dryer sheets and fresh cut grass. It sent his heart thumping so consistently every time he sat down in class that by now it must have been a Pavlovian reaction—*Charlie*, Jamie said in his ear.

He turned and through the blue tint, at looked as if Jamie’s body was on display in a fish tank. He wasn’t skinny, but he wasn’t overly beefy either. He was strong. Jamie could fight up a

weight class if he boxed, John was sure of it. Women wanted him, men wanted him, beds that creaked wanted him, heavy tables, plastic chairs.

“We look good tonight,” he said.

“If by ‘we’ you mean you, then yeah. I’d agree.” Nope, not original enough.

But Jamie smiled, rubbing the back of his head like an anime character, trying to look embarrassed—as if he had never been told this before. He had been told this before. Even if Jamie just did it for show, John felt lucky to be talking to a guy that nice, or maybe just sympathetic. John couldn’t help from wondering if he did he really just do it for show. A person like him having real modesty seemed, strange.

“Hey so—”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” John said, implementing the policy that he couldn’t blow a joke if he wasn’t there.

“Oh...well,” Jamie swiveled his head around the party “Well, okay. Come back and find me though, I want to talk to you.” He lifted his shoulders, sucked in his stomach, and retracted his arms, making himself slender. “I feel awkward by myself in this orgy of fraternitards.”

John laughed, “Alright, well what did you want to talk to me about?”

Jamie lifted his eyebrows, “Oh, nothing specific. Just want to talk to you.”

Just want to talk to *you*—the word made John’s response bumble around in his head before actually falling out.

“Hey, I mean, I can’t blame you for wanting to talk to me. I’m pretty much the most popular guy at this party,” John said. He turned to the closest person wearing a pastel polo and backwards hat, and rose up his hand for a high five.

“Hey there, T-Bone!”

T-Bone returned the gesture by pretending it didn't exist. John was finally in his element.

He turned back to Jamie and muttered that he would catch T-bone on the flip side, and Jamie laughed.

"Classic T-Bone," Jamie said. John wanted Jamie to put his arm around him like they were bros, or more. The stereo's rambunctious music was tuned to their shared chuckles.

"Alright," John said, "I'll be right back."

John concentrated hard on remembering the spot they were at, sure that he was going to make it back there soon. It was impossible to move where he wanted. Half the people were holding solo cups chest-level so he was trying to be careful, but everyone else ran into him constantly like the spokes of revolving doors. Everything went yellow and there was a swell of noise amongst the people. They started packing in tighter and tighter until John thought he was trapped by all these people whose tiger eyes glinted in the spotlight—

John slammed his eyes shut.

No. This wasn't happening right now. He was just having fun at this party like everyone else. After shouldering his way to the bathroom he'd find Jamie and go from there. Maybe he shouldn't even go to the bathroom. He could still turn around, and just hold it in till later.

He reopened his eyes and could only see the backs of everyone at the party, as they'd all turned away from him. Then, picking the direction he thought Jamie was in, he started grabbing people by the shoulders, wading through them like his arms were paddles. They packed in tighter and John pried as hard as he could. Two people finally broke apart, but before John could jump out someone else spilled in through the hole. A naked body fell around John's chest and grabbed him by the shoulder with all its strength, pulling its munching mouth up to John's face. John yanked at him and growled in frustration, but nothing gave. It was like trying to pull off his own

arm. Charlie crept all the way up, and his mouth closed on John like a leech. A groan of hot breath blew through the wet tickle of gums into John's ear. The music roared above Charlie's bellow of hunger, and the people would not stop dancing.

Someone shot their arm into the crowd and grabbed John by the scruff of his shirt. It had a bare third of forearm showing with a cuff of flannel just below the elbow. John was pulled out of the group of people and the oscillating movement came to a halt. Anthony stood in front of him, smiling.

"So, my friend," Anthony's hand was still on John's arm, holding him from falling back into the grinding gears that ran the house, "How's your penis?"

John rattled his head and cowered at the mess of people he had just been saved from. He realized that he'd been pulled right into the line for the bathroom.

Anthony seemed unable to wait for an answer. "Because it's about to get some fantastic news," he said. "See, you didn't tell me that your Kate was Kate *Hucksby*," Anthony said. "She went to my high school. Dude, her nickname was 'The Virgin Slayer.'" He was nodding his head as if to say, *Oh yeah, that's right*.

"Jesus," was all John could say.

"She pretended like she didn't like it, but everyone knew it was her that came up with the name."

"Really?" he said, half to Anthony and half to himself. Inside, John was scolding himself for thinking that she was being genuine when they were talking in the foyer. But no, he was just prey.

“Hey what is this shit on the side of your face?” Anthony grazed John’s cheek with his finger and then recoiled. “It’s sticky.”

John started furiously rubbing his shoulder against his face. “Fuck,” he said. After running through all of the logical explanations, he figured it had to be spilt beer. He told Anthony about how goddamn ridiculous walking through the crowd was, and that he guessed, really, it would have been weird if he hadn’t been spilled on.

Anthony nodded in agreement and then started hopping up and down in attempts to see where the line was going. “I’ve been waiting in this line the entire fucking time, going on faith that it’s for the bathroom and not the keg. If it is for the keg, I’m pooping on their tap.”

After a few minutes as they approached the front of the line, it became apparent that the line was indeed for the bathroom. The lights had changed again to a red which seemed to fill absolutely everything. Anthony was surveying the crowd and John was leaned up against the wall. It had been awhile now—too long to trust Jamie was in the same spot, and too long for Jamie not to reasonably believe that John had ditched him.

Anthony gave a tiny laugh that hissed like a snake. Suddenly only half of his arm was visible, the other half having been implanted into the curdled mass. He yanked out a tanned arm followed by a pair of watchful, blue orbs, then a smooth body with a yellow dress draped over it. Anthony’s smirk gleamed reddly as he leaned back, kicked both Kate and John into the bathroom, and then slammed the door.

The bathroom was small but it had a toilet and shower, and everything was covered in spots of college grime. Kate slapped him unexpectedly hard on the shoulder for leaving her before. The rest of the party had been lame, and she was just getting ready to leave.

“So what were you going to tell me after we had walked through all of those people?”

“Oh,” Kate said, toeing the ground. She said that she had decided why she liked being around him. “You’re like, the perfect mix of awkward and funny.” She threw her arms out wide and came in for a hug. “You’re just fun.”

They held each other like that and then awkwardly staggered with their feet together towards the wall until John’s back was against it. She smacked a kiss on his ear. He wondered how something as gentle as her lips could crack like a whip inside his head—he told himself to stop thinking. If John was sure of one thing, it was that thinking too much was going to ruin this. It was as if he’d run fire drills of this situation a million times in his head.

He rubbed his face down through the side of her hair all the way to the bottom of her neck and kissed. Good. He looked back up and Kate grabbed his face with her mouth. It was like drowning. Kate’s leg slowly crawled up the side of his. The only sensation he experienced was the pressing of the climax of her slender, womanly legs on his thigh. He held her ass in his hands and squeezed. The Virgin Slayer.

Dark spots seemed to form on the shower curtain for a second, as if fingers were pawing behind it.

“Fuck,” he moaned in frustration.

“What?”

“I have to piss.”

Her hot breath collected on his neck. She said of course, but was, of course, disappointed. The blue of Kate’s eyes cut him deeply.

He walked over with the speed of a stick-bug, and looking down at the open lid of the toilet, he knew there was no way he’d be able to go. There was just no way. John tried to ignore it and just not fuck this up for once. He took out his dick and watched the slow but constant

ruffling behind the shower curtains. Still standing soundlessly at the toilet, shame crept up and hung from his heart like a limp balloon string. His eyes filled with embarrassed tears, and he barely had the finger muscles to zip up his pants. He wished he could disappear. Trying not to cry, he turned around and walked at a brisk pace directly for the door.

“Wait—” Kate said as she grabbed his arm before he could get out, and for the second time that night John shook her off of him. He threw the door closed as he left. Trying his best not to bounce off of people like a pinball, John began to wade through the crowd. Already his heart felt heavy with regret, knowing that he had fucked it up in there, that he was still fucking it up, making a wrong choice with each step he took. But he kept moving, sprinting until he burst out the door. Even when in the alley around the corner he couldn’t escape the house’s cum breath. John screamed, kicking a plastic cup on the ground, then walking over to the wall of the brick alley. He still had to piss and it made him even angrier that he had to look around to see if the coast was clear.

After a moment he got ready to pee but something on the wall stopped him. It was something drawn on the brick in sidewalk chalk or something like it. John perceived it as if it were a cloud of locusts, moving amorously for miles before finally overcoming him.

Charlie, the image on the wall was titled. The figure was as far away from a man as something could be while still being identified as such. Everything about it drooped—its posture, its skin, its jaw. And the only hair it had dangled from the eyebrows all the way down to the chin. It was fucking disgusting—fucking disgusting that it even had a name, like someone had named their goiter or malignant tumor.

John, of course, recognized it. He suspected the drawing’s existence to be just another self-defeating thought, one more plight of his insanity.

Then before John's eyes the chalk image of Charlie began to move. It stumbled in the wall and John lost the ability to breathe, now only swallowing air and burping. Clenching his throat, John crippled to the dirt. As he sat there, crumbled chalk seemed to draw on his soul the memory of this creature, who had walked with John for what he now remembered as forever. Suddenly immobile on the wall, Charlie hung over John as heavily as an ivory idol. For what felt like the first time, John had no confusion or unanswered questions. All he wanted was reluctance as the tears crept into the corners of his mouth.

Dirt covered him in the alleyway as breath came back to him in wheezes. Still coughing he wiped some type of residue off his hands into a patch of grass. He concentrated only on breathing. The night was gorgeous. Sometimes you have to have faded party music in the background to appreciate the fact that you've chosen nature. The stars were out, and the crickets played tunes for the constellations. Almost as if on cue, a breeze fluttered by bringing with it the scent of the night.

On the wall the picture was still there, and still ugly. But just a series of lines and shapes that anyone could draw. John hoisted himself off the ground and wiped powder off his hands like a gymnast. Walking over he put his hand on the chalk outline, and felt the roughness of the brick.

"I've found you," John said. "Just a drawing I've done across the side of my brain, done in sidewalk chalk."

Even if John had wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to suppress his smile.

"Is this what normal people feel all the time?" he whispered.

He let the solace sweep over him in waves

“John,” he heard. It was Jamie’s voice. John turned to see Jamie stepping into the alleyway, followed shortly by Kate. They walked over to John, and each took a spot leaning on the opposite wall of the alley. Surprisingly, John felt glad they’d found him. He knew if he went home without setting things straight, he’d be upset with himself tomorrow morning.

“I’m genuinely sorry that I jerked you guys around so much tonight.” John never thought he’d be the one saying that sentence to them.

They started talking, and apparently Anthony had been hovering around the bathroom while John and Kate were in there. Kate saw him when she came out and put two and two together.

“I hated that nickname,” she said, turning away as if to avoid looks of accusation. “Besides, didn’t we come to college to, you know, remold who we are if we didn’t like the person we were in high school?” She continued looking away, readjusting against the brick at her back.

John had never been more attracted to someone in his life.

Then after looking at Kate, Jamie chimed in, “I know it says I’m interested in men on my Facebook, and I am.” He scratched his head. “But it’s not really a clear-cut path for everyone. I mean, we’ve all had different experiences.”

John nodded through the awkward silence, and Kate hadn’t looked back yet.

Jamie laughed a bit nervously. “But damn, dude. You weren’t kidding when you said you had to go.”

It was at this point that the smell of urine crawled up John’s nostrils, and he realized that behind him was a gigantic wet spot on the brick. It was monstrous, and John laughed bashfully at

its size. Staring at the wall though, it seemed empty to him, and he—paused. He had forgotten about—something—

“Yeah,” Kate said, turning back to him. “That’s impressive.”

A single chuckle fell from John’s mouth before he glanced back again at that wall. Rubbing the back of his head, John slowly turned back around. They weren’t making fun of him, no. No, they weren’t bitter, or mad at him. He did ditch them both. But whatever. *Who cares?* he thought. Well, he did—right? That’s what made him the guy that he was, he cares. *I care.* But caring about all of his faults wouldn’t do him any good, and there were so many. Maybe “caring” wasn’t the right word. Indulging? *Yes*, he shouldn’t indulge in caring about others—*no*, he thought, no. He paused. No... wait.

The empty stain peered behind him; Charlie peered behind him, eyebrows hung over his face like a cancer wig.

Awkward silence hung in the alley and John did not know what to say, but he had to say it right. He had to—and *he had to. He was going to die that night, he had to say it right—*

“Shhh.” The sound waves cushioned his ear like a vertical pointer finger over the mouth of John’s mind. Kate floated from her corner until her body caressed his. She graced the tip of her finger across his face. “You don’t have to say anything,” she said, “anymore.”

Down her shirt, John saw that her chest was cupped in a flannel bra. She nestled him with her breasts and his shoes came undone, double knots falling limp to the floor.

John saw Jamie alone a few feet away. He wanted Jamie to like him but he didn’t want to talk. Kate whispered a witty observation in John’s ear, and Jamie immediately doubled over in laughter. It was nice to gain approval without having to say anything, John thought.

“John should be a comedian,” Jamie said. He exuded a relaxed scent when he walked over to lean one shoulder against the brick, and hold John’s wrist, “I wish I could be as funny as John.” John smiled. Each blade of grass clapped with raucous cheer. *Encore! Encore!* They said. *Encore, encore,* Charlie mumbled.

Kate and Jamie stood on either side of John now. All of their backs were against the wall and a passing wind tickled the patches of crabgrass in the alley.

Kate smiled, just to herself. She moved her tongue inside of John’s mouth. Jamie now had John’s hand between both of his. He joined, grabbing John’s mouth with his own. Kate’s tongue gyred, and Jamie breathed through his nose because his mouth was full. Kate’s hips humped rhythmically against John’s leg and Jamie grabbed John’s ass. Kate’s body moaned, so soft in all the right places, and Jamie squeezed him harder and harder. John could feel their sex traveling through him.

Without the pressures of conversations or the search for wit, John was content. The audience of his show had dissipated from the theater, and he felt amazingly alone. Feeling the bodies of Kate and Jamie against his own, he knew they were alone with him.

They stopped and all three looked in unison at the far wall. The brick and mortar’s seamless creep had been interrupted by an archway with a door beneath it, the arch’s great grey stones rounded from years of use. On top, “The Cafeteria” was jaggedly scripted in chalk. John had never felt so far from a daydream in his life. He was ready to lose his virginity.

Jamie and Kate scrambled out of their clothes. Kate’s full breasts played with gravity, subtly nodding with each breath. Jamie stretched his arms all the way up to the stars, tightening his eight-pack abs to a full reach in the process. After an eager grin from John, all three walked in.

*

The heavy atmosphere filled John's nostrils even before the door closed. Red, yellow, and blue columns striped the walls as if a dirty beach ball had been stretched around its perimeter.

"Should I take my clothes off too?" John asked, once again trying to fill the silence. Jamie and Kate looked at each other and then nodded in consent. Together they stared at John as he turned away to undress.

He crossed his arms to guard from the sudden cold as he looked back for Kate and Jamie. Both of them were fully clothed again, and he just caught Jamie's shoe and the back of the wafting yellow sundress as they walked out the door, one after the other, shutting it behind them.

A familiar man was sitting cross-legged in one of the room's arrant chairs. John had made a mistake. He had been here before.

Behind the man, a dollop of floppy skin sat in the corner. A bib stained with red lay over it, and John felt long wisps of hair scratching on his bare feet.

The cross-legged man's right foot bobbed freely up and down. He closed his eyes in concentration and took a deep breath. On opening his lids, the irises and pupils drooped out of his eyes and onto the floor. The road map of blood vessels left behind in each eye were of places John recognized.

"Finally, our leading man!" He threw his hands in the air as if conducting down the raining applause.

John closed his eyes on the Cafeteria for a moment, blocking out the cheers that the man brought forth in his head. "No," he said. "I can be in control."

The man lost his smile at this. He leaned in close, giving John his bald stare. “A drawing across the side of your brain.” He leaned back, lifted his foot, and turned its wagging into a stamping on the ground. Over and over again, *CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!* “Drum roll please,” he growled over the beat. “Indeed,” he said to John, “Let’s have a look and see!” John saw his eye vessels bulge with blood. Then the man roared.

“Let the show begin!”

An arm crawled out from the pile of skin still sitting in the corner and its nail-less fingers pawed at the ground until Charlie’s naked body had completely emerged and he staggered to his feet. Charlie heaved, gurgling through years of saliva and then nearly falling to the ground in exhaustion.

John fired backward, knocking over chairs as he toppled to the ground. He yanked and pulled at the legs of scattered tables and chairs in an attempt to wriggle away but the cold metal rods snagged his naked body. Two chairs silently rose up at his sides, and John took one final breath before they came down on him. Their legs slammed around John’s wrists like solid steel slap-its so that the bones shattered. A table near his feet jerked itself through the air to its tipping point and then plunged to the floor, mangling his feet beneath.

John wailed high and hard with all the air in his lungs, eyes squinted and head contorted. The haphazard slaps of Charlie’s feet advanced in the silence after the scream.

The cafeteria chairs spread his arms out wide and then tilted John’s body up, facing Charlie’s figure which shrugged towards him.

He yelled for it to stop at all lengths and pitches. His diaphragm gyrated and every sound grew. In that moment the Cafeteria heard his voice hit every note and every combination of words. He spoke the answer to all of his problems and the words echoed from his mouth. He

cried, laughed, shook out all of the meaning that spelled his life, and if there had been anyone else in the Cafeteria they would have seen it. They would have heard it.

The explosion continued until Charlie bumped into him with his loosely fleshed bones so that they were face to face, and John let his muscles detract. Finally muted, the only sound left was his own breath. Tears of saliva ran down Charlie's gums, dripping over the scab in place of a quivering lower lip. Charlie mumbled something lowly, and then slugged on top of him.

Awake

When I found my parents' door locked at night, I would sit on the knit-cushion chair beside it and wait, curling my knees under my sleep shirt, leaning back, purposefully making a noise or shifting around more than I had to so that when my mother opened the door and saw me curled up, pretending to sleep, she'd let me in.

My mother and I are not best friends. We don't talk about adult issues together like peers, and when we're driving just the two of us, we both enjoy whatever song is playing on the radio rather than force conversation.

Every time I tell her I love her—when I've got the van's window rolled down before my drive back to college, or when I call her to make sure she's put money into my bank account for rent—I feel like I'm reading a script from a movie. I've felt this way for years.

When I was a younger, I always slept with the light on. I had a pink porcelain lamp next to my bed with an *Aladdin* shade. It was white and dusty, with prints of flying carpets, Abu, and Jafar. I would refuse to go to bed without a cassette tape story playing from the boom box, which I remember being made of yellow and black plastic like a power tool.

At least until the fourth grade, I was never able to sleep consistently alone in my own bed. When I was very young I would open my mother's door without hesitation. She would see me, and then lift up the covers for me to crawl in. I was always a snuggler, and I remember that we made spoons.

Perhaps it is me being defensive, but I am hyper-aware of the Oedipal connotations of such a relationship, and for a long time now I have kept my mother at arm's length.

As I sit here, forcing myself to recall that other-me—the one who couldn't sleep by himself no matter how many years his parents tried to wean him—he feels like the butt of an embarrassing story I'm hearing from a someone else's mom. How Jimmy wet the bed until he was nine.

My shame is deep enough that I no longer feel as if I've lived through these memories. Me—sitting here right now—I cannot feel a need to lie against her, or to time my breath with hers as the only sounds in the room. When I think back to lying in bed with her I only feel the

sting of stigmas, embarrassments, and shame of having an inappropriate relationship with my mother.

Sleep is a grey area for what is appropriate and what is not. You can sleep with your dog or your cat, or you can have a sleepover or slumber party with friends. But it can have such intense connotations if used in a certain way—if I “spent the night” at a girl’s house, or if Janie “slept with” Johnnie.

But between me and my mom, I see sleep as this primal, maternal connection which keeps us bound by the cord no matter what.

To this day, having flown the coop and gone to college, I still have problems sleeping. I no longer listen to tapes or keep the light on. I’ll roll around for hours stuffing pillows in between my legs, moist with my own sweat and frustration, tangled in the haphazard bed sheets. If it seems pointless, I’ll stop trying all together and sit down at my computer having accepted defeat.

There are two different types of sleep: rapid eye movement (REM) and non rapid eye movement (NREM). NREM is split into four stages 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Stage 1: Onset

In the darkness, a hormone is released in the brain called melatonin that facilitates sleep onset. Its unofficial nickname is “The vampire hormone.” You can actually buy cherry flavored supplements of melatonin to take before bed, which I do. I take them every night and have done so for almost a decade.

Sometimes I think about how by the time I get in bed nowadays, my mom will have been asleep, 174 miles away, for hours already. But when I was younger she used to tuck me in every night. I would nag her and rip her away from drying her hair or reading the funnies to either read Harry Potter to me or at least stand over me and say goodnight.

I slept strictly with the light on, and I didn't learn of melatonin supplements' existence until late in my childhood. I imagine that my melatonin gland was like a shriveled raisin, dying in the overheat of sunlight.

As a kid, it was not nightmares that scared me. I rarely slipped in and out of sleep, or waded through the night in disorienting half-dreams. I would have easily taken that option if it meant being able to "slip" into sleep, but that never happened. No for me there was something about being in my room, alone with the light on, that kept me in a constant fear of bedtime. Awake with all of my things, certain shadows became enemies—shadows cast against the wall by my open door, or from beaded necklaces hanging on the closet shutters. It's unsettling to be so awake.

Some of my friends call their moms once or twice a week.

Recently, I found out that my sister talks to our mom every day. Once she told me that she hadn't talked to Mom in a week, as if this were a freak occurrence. At the time, I don't think I had talked to her in a month. She used to call me more, but less so now.

I hear other friends complaining of their mothers badgering them with calls or messages on Facebook, but mine does not.

Sometimes when I was young I would get bold, throw out my chest, and tell my parents I'd be spending the night at my friend Mike's house tonight. We'd stay up late playing Sega but eventually, for some reason, he wanted the fun to end. He wanted to sleep. So we'd pull out his couch, throw on the scratchy tan blanket with the silky edges, flick off the light, stop talking, lie in stillness with our heads on the hard couch cushions used as pillows, watch the green light emanating from the time on the VCR, stare at the layers of shadows peaking in from the still-lit hallway, wonder how staying the night could have ever seemed like a good idea, try not to think about looking at the VCR, say, "Mike, Mike," listen to his breath, carefully feel the zig-zag velvet couch pattern while wondering how somehow, so long ago, in the safety of daytime, I felt only independence and the freedom of no homework—then, sit in the light outside Mike's mom's door with my back against the wall, holding their portable phone in my hand, waiting to make the inevitable call to my mother, to ask if she would come pick me up in fifteen minutes.

Perhaps this fear was the reason that I grew up the way I did, so attached to her—perhaps this was what started it all.

Stage 2: The Threshold

Our bodies are still monitoring the outside environment in this stage. In fact, if you wake someone from this stage, they'll probably tell you they weren't actually sleeping.

As I got older, 7 or 8 maybe, I spent entire nights sitting outside my mom's room until it got light. That or I'd open the door, and stare at the ground until she woke up. I'd ask if she could come in my room. She'd get out of bed and usher me backwards, staggering back to my room with her eyes closed, bumping into hampers and door knobs along the way.

She'd sit at the foot of my bed, in the dim yellow lamplight. Then, finally comfortable enough to close my eyes, I would lay there, mind in my feet, just feeling her weight pressing down on the mattress. After thirty minutes, she might reach up to the dresser adjacent to the foot of my bed that her back had been on, and fiddle with the clock radio on top of it, setting her alarm for work in the morning. Then she'd turn back around and close her eyes.

There are these separate versions of me that exist deep in my memory—versions who aren't burdened by the shame I have today. These memories I draw from, in a lot of ways, are like dreams.

They both have fragments of sight and sound that I can recreate, and both are based around a kernel of emotion. In many dreams, the one thing you take away is what you were feeling—its sheer intensity. In re-describing the circumstances, you realize how silly it is that a snowball fight with Icee slush would merit such intense, life-changing exhilaration. It's almost as if the feeling were the only real part about it, and the events whirling around it were simply incidental.

That love I felt for her as a child, I feel, is like an emotion from one of those wildly immersive dreams, from which you wake up and realize the world is nothing how you'd thought it was just a moment ago. It slowly melts away and soon you can't seem to recall details, and then you just move on with your life.

It is a common misconception that dreams only occur during REM sleep. They can actually occur in any.

NREM dreams tend to be short and logical.

Of the most common dream themes, losing valuable possessions is number 5.

Number 4 is flying.

Number 3, falling.

I had a dream once where the sky was purple and black. There was a rope bridge that stretched over a pit of lava and my mom was hanging onto a plank in the middle of it. If asked, I wouldn't be able to single out too many details—no smells or sensations. I would never have “sworn I was there.” But still, the lava was there and I was there. She fell, and she was gone. And deep down, I was afraid because I knew I would never get her back. It's the dream that somehow almost brought me to tears during computer class in the first grade, hours after I had woken up to the familiar sounds of her keys jangling out the door for work, and then ran to try and grab onto her, so I could press my face into her jacket before she made it out the door.

Back in those nights when my mom would stay on the foot of my bed, I lived in the threshold of sleep. I trained myself to open my eyes every few minutes and make sure she was still there in my room. As I got older, more and more often, she would try and leave me in the middle of the night. I'd panic if I caught her getting up off the bed and tell her, no, no, no, I wasn't asleep yet. Then I'd beg for fifteen more minutes.

Sometimes when I opened my eyes, all that would be left were my tiny pink lamp and the wrinkled covers in the spot where she used to sit.

There is a reason that waking up alone is a horrible feeling. You let your guard down as you close your eyes for sleep, releasing all vigilance and accepting that this is the point at which you're most vulnerable. Only when you wake up alone do you realize that you were wrong.

Looking back on that image still hurts. It's a loneliness I haven't felt for a long time, because I don't think I've allowed myself to be so vulnerable in a long time.

Stages 3 and 4: Deep Wave Sleep

Deep wave sleep is the most difficult point from which to wake a person. Try to wake him one minute either side of deep wave sleep and he should come out of it fine. Wake him during deep wave sleep and he will not be happy.

I see deep wave sleep as a hibernation—long, groggy, static, and best uninterrupted.

In the fourth grade my mother started taking me to a psychologist—the same psychologist who would introduce me to melatonin.

At first I had apprehensions about taking the drug. I told my mom that I didn't want to have to depend on it. I felt that I was fine now. Things weren't so bad.

The therapist and I played UNO and she brought up my sleeping habits on the sly. Eventually, I opened up to her about my nighttime fears and inability to sleep. I learned that my habits weren't normal. While it was true that I didn't go in her bed anymore, people my age weren't still sitting outside their mothers' rooms or knocking on their doors. My mom needed sleep too, didn't she? I was afraid, but I was big enough now to recognize that I wasn't the only one involved. Mom needed time alone.

When I'd walk out of that office, I never thought I was crazy for having talked to a therapist, because I wasn't aware of the stigmas. But still, after discussing my abnormalities, I knew something was wrong. I knew enough that when my friends asked me why I had come in to school two hours late, and I'd tell them "doctor's appointment," it felt like a lie.

Going to those sessions, I was forced to look around and realize that I was something beyond a momma's boy—something unhealthy, something undesirable even to my mother—and it even had to be explained to me via psychotherapy. For a few nights after this I sat outside my mother's room for hours without bothering to knock—not tired, maybe reading; seeing myself and the rest of the house as if through a black pane of glass.

So I gave up and took the melatonin.

I began turning off my light before I went to bed shortly thereafter, and I slept like a baby. Soon, if my mom ever sat on my bed while I was in it, I'd pull my legs in and sit Indian-style until she left. I turned my cheek every time she tried to kiss me goodnight.

Taking the melatonin I remember much more clearly than any of the others. If for no other reason than it is still the only way I sleep today.

I tend to sleep late. Like, very late. Like, "If it's before 4pm I'm not even going to bother inviting Ian to the movie." Some people are in awe of me, saying they could never do that in a million years, as if it were some sort of talent. Once during a winter break not too long ago, because the days were so short, by the time I woke up for the day it was already nighttime. The darkness pressed on me through the window, and the clock glowed in front of my half-closed eye, 6:36 p.m.

When I'm at home these days, my mother is disappointed with how late I sleep. I think this is because she imagines me spending my days tagging along with her to the post office, or going shopping, or sitting with her in the lobby as we wait for the oil to get changed. But I never do any of these things. By the time I wake up, my buddies from high school have already texted me, and plans have already been made. She smiles and says, "Okay," and then goes back to eating dinner.

When I tell my mother I love her, underneath, I don't feel like it. The memory of the therapist and the emptiness at the foot of my bed begin to echo. Something urges me to scan the room and see who is watching. I only say the words after reassuring myself that it's okay, because everyone says it.

I must tell myself this every time I speak to her with closeness.

But I search, and think.

I am ashamed of my shame, but I feel it nonetheless.

The melatonin did not remove all my problems surrounding going to sleep. For a long time after graduating high school, when I came home, my sleep schedule consisted of lying on my bed, and then watching *Seinfeld* for episodes and episodes and episodes. I would stay awake by the light of the laptop until five-thirty in the morning. I'd always force myself to smack the laptop shut in the middle of an episode. If I waited for the credits, for closure, then as I lay in the darkness with my restless muscles, I knew I'd feel alone in this room just like I used to—taking one, two, three melatonin over the course of three hours as I lie in the dark, waiting to slip into a much needed sleep.

REM Sleep

The final stage—totally and qualitatively different from the other stages. All voluntary muscles undergo paralysis, and the eyes remain in constant motion, as if under their own volition. Brain waves in the REM stage are identical to those present while awake. REM sleep isn't a time of recovery; it's a time of activity.

Just like our strongest memories, dreams that come during rapid eye movement are vivid and story-like—they're the ones in which the dreamer swears they were actually "there."

Once when I was back home, I asked my mom about how I acted as a kid—curious to know if there was anything super or special about me. After leading me to her room and sitting down on the bed, she reached back into the bookcase behind her pillow and pulled out a little bound book. For the first seven years of my life, she had apparently been writing about me in this journal. The pages were littered with scribbled-on post-its and pictures, the writing ranging from jotted kids-say-the-darndest-things quotes from me, to observations of my evolving interactions with other people, to full scenes. I spread a few notes out over the comforter. She picked up one of the pieces of wrinkled Steno paper, and began to read, "He presented me with a flower he illegally picked at Disney World and when I asked, 'Oh Ian—how nice, what is this?' He said 'This is love.' I said, 'And you're giving it to me?'" and he said, "Yes because you are love."

And we sat on the bed exchanging stories by lamplight.

The TV is always blaring when I arrive home from school late at night—it's my dad in the next room, asleep and content to stay there.

I know I could walk up the stairs, drag my hand along the old, ornately carved chair, and peek my head through the door next to it. If I did, I might think about that night when we looked through my book, when she continued reading, laughing harder than I'd ever seen her, tipping tip up her glasses with her finger to wipe away a tear.

Upon looking inside, I would see our black cat Ellie, who has placed herself on top of Mom's hip, squinting up at me in the doorway. I could walk up and poke my mom on the shoulder a few times. She would gasp in panic with one delirious eye open, just as she always does until she realizes that it's me, and that she's no longer dreaming. I could lean down and put my arms around her and squeeze and not care if I was bringing her too close. I could hug her in her confusion, saying, "Mom, I love you"—because of the wrinkles she left at the foot of my bed, because of the basketfuls of tapes that she gave to me and then listened to at night with her hand on my ankle, because I know I've abandoned her, because of her long straight hair and large-framed glasses in the pictures with me as a baby, and because looking at those pictures of her kissing me on the head, I see how in love she was.

If you look closely at the eyelids of a dreamer during REM sleep, you can see the raised mound of pupil in its constant movement, shifting beneath the skin.

Even since writing this I have talked to my mother, and I still feel much the same way as I always have. There are flashes of clarity and pride in my feelings, and deep-down I accept them in theory. But for me, I feel that what I'm looking for is just like sleep—the ephemerality of fear and love that I've never quite captured, the place I'd like to walk to freely.

Sleep helps us remember.

REM sleep may actively contribute to processes that consolidate whatever we learned just before sleep—during REM, the same pattern of brain activation somehow repeats and rehearses the material. Some theories say it's the dreams—that these stories are how we create memory: a lamp or a chair or a word that is spoken, love, a distant image of a boy curled up in a ball, a dream from which I awake.

Closed Tab

Midtown wasn't a college bar. Sure it attracted some kids from Bullhead, as would any place that served Bud Lite and sat within a mile of campus, but it was more for the older guys, although Ned himself was only thirty-seven—a place where you could drink in peace. Ned figured the wood-paneled jukebox, frayed felt pool table that would sometimes swallow up the cue ball like you had paid for it, and raggedy bearded clientele had a charm that maybe younger people couldn't appreciate yet. Hell, he didn't even appreciate it before Molly died. There were groups of backwards hats and hiked up skirts who'd come by on Thursdays and Fridays. Ned could tell they considered it “their bar”—their little hole-in-the-wall gem where they could get cheap rum and Cokes before moving on to the nightclub, enjoying the quaintness as if everyone there was part of a novelty attraction. But this was fine by Ned, as long as they left him alone.

Whenever Ned brought up Midtown in conversation these days, Skinner would start easing into questions about who he'd gone with—even though he knew perfectly well what the answer was. It wasn't that Skinner shouldn't have been concerned about the lone-drinking, having a few too many was what landed Ned in therapy in the first place.

A week after his wife Molly passed away, Ned started sending out slurred late-night voicemails to random numbers in the telephone book. Gerald Skinner, his therapist, was a man of maybe forty-five or fifty. A faded black and grey goatee was the only hair on his head, and he filled out his chair like a man behind the wheel. They'd been working together for five months. It was six months ago now, that she passed. She had gone in the night, a sudden arrest from an irregular heartbeat she'd had since birth. Ned remembered quite clearly what the body felt like under his hand, her heat. He later found out that rigor mortis sets in quickly—as soon as fifteen

minutes—so when he had pressed on her chest, finding everything normal besides a beat, he knew she might have died only just a minute or two before he woke up.

“I’m just concerned,” Skinner said, “about the habits. I get the charm of the place. Bars can be a great place to meet people and watch the game, but—”

“But being in a room full of people doesn’t mean you can’t be lonely,” Ned said, gripping his water bottle and spinning the cap with his thumb. The miniature bottle always sat on the side table next to the couch when Ned walked into Skinner’s office. It smelled like wood, and the lights were always low. One of those Freud couches with the head tipped up at an angle sat along the far wall, but Ned had never used it figuring it for more of an antique.

“Have you asked Tom out to lunch?”

Ned hadn’t. Ever since Molly died, whenever she was mentioned Tom would tense up, cut off the conversation, half give Ned a pat on the back, and then turn away to shake his head as if wondering how the world could be so cruel. Work was bad enough as it was. The quiet of accounting, numbers in numbers out, W-2’s—it was all blanketed in depression. And now Ned and Tom just walked by each other’s cubicles with their hands in their pockets, each one fully aware of how unaware they were both acting.

“Do you think that talking to people would stop you from feeling so lonely?”

“I talk to you.”

Skinner was very good at keeping eye-contact. He used it now, staring Ned down for a moment before answering. “That’s true,” he said.

“I mean, I want to meet new people. If you would ask me, I’d say, ‘Yes, I want to.’”

“I’m asking. Do you want to?”

“I know I should want to, and do want to, I just don’t.”

“Don’t want to?”

“Don’t do it.”

“Why do you think that is? Is something stopping you?”

“I see people from the office making jokes about paperwork and waving in the hallways, and *they* look content, but I can’t—” Ned looked around in search of words for a moment. “Just, that’s where it stops.”

“If you could teleport into the future, and just like that,” he snapped his fingers, “you would have a bar buddy, no effort, would you do it?”

“No effort.”

Skinner nodded.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s something I’d like you to think about over the next week,” Skinner said, looking at his watch and then shaking it back down under his cuff. “Experiment with even just imagining yourself in the company of someone else at the bar.” He smiled, folding one leg over the other. Their sessions always ran five minutes over but Skinner never seemed to notice. Ned noticed that he didn’t do this with all of his patients—different people would walk out of the room, always ten minutes exactly before Ned’s appointment.

Ned knew he looked forward to Wednesdays with slightly abnormal anticipation. He’d sometimes picture in his head one of those hanging wall calendars with nothing marked but giant red X’s lining the Wednesday column. But the truth was that Ned felt closer to Skinner than he did most others. Inside his office, Ned could feel anything he wanted to feel. Skinner was the only one he could talk about Molly to who would smile—a quiet smile so that Ned might talk about her a bit more, if that’s what he wanted.

At work the next day Tom walked passed his cubicle a few times and Ned considered asking him to go to lunch, though that was as far as it got. They used to go to dinner together—double dates. Tom, his wife Paula, Ned, and Molly would do it at least once a month. Sometimes they'd go see scary movies just like Tom and he did with girls when they were teenagers. Molly would squeeze Ned's hand as the bellowing of the cellos rose into violent trills, the madman stalking from behind.

Later that night as Ned got into his car, he looked over at the passenger's metal door handle, wondering when the last time was that someone had pinched the side of their hand in it. After that the drive to Midtown was reflexive, as was slouching down at the farthest end of the bar, as was ordering an Old Rasputin.

It was quiet that night. One or two conversations kept up in the distance. Ned sipped the heavy stout, eavesdropping on the glasses knocking against the bar. There was a hint of smoke on everything inside since the owner never enforced the state ban. But that was fine. At least it never smelled like puke, which Ned remembered being a minor problem for bars back in college. He remembered Molly always used to smell like she had just done laundry along with just a hint of skin or sweat, signifying it as just her natural scent. In those smelly bars he liked to slow dance with her, and tuck his nose against the side of her neck. After being with someone for so long, those inherent smells fade into the background, but every once in a while when rolling over in bed towards her, or pulling out an old BSU sweater of hers from the back of the closet, the scent would meet him. Before, when they were both in bed, sometimes when the transparent curtains would billow lazily into the room, her scent would fill the room even though she just lay there sleeping.

Ned looked over to Eddie, the bouncer, to maybe talk to him so he'd have something to appease skinner with, but he saw that Eddie was busy. He was waving in a group of something like five college-aged looking kids. There was this girl among them who was smiling at no one in particular, with folded arms and a lock of hair brushed behind her ear. Once inside, she sat down on the cracked leather bar stool and her jean shorts pushed that much more up just beyond her thigh. Midtown was as dimly lit as any bar, but even from across the room Ned could see that her eyes were dark brown. He swiveled back around so that his nose hung over his beer, and he inhaled the smell of burnt barley.

He picked his head up and threw back the rest of the Russian. He ordered another, and walked over to Eddie, scooting a stool up next to him with his free hand. Ned sat down and asked about that brunette that just walked in, and Eddie said she was Julie, 22 years old. After a moment though, he shrugged.

"Her ID's a fake," he said. "Name might not even be Julie."

Ned went back to his seat with the intention of sipping the rest of his beer and leaving. It wasn't for about an hour that he realized he'd been just watching the girl dance, and that he'd stopped drinking some time ago. Although somehow he still felt drunk.

Ned turned around and saw that another guy—Gerry, he'd heard his name was—was staring over to the group as well. He had a face like the palm of a baseball mitt and always wore a BSU jacket that could have been thirty years old. Ned figured him more of a trailer-park fan than for an alum. He was one of the people who'd occasionally light up a cigarette inside, just as he did so now, eyes still on the girl. Julie was dancing by herself, dipping her hips and swaying. Somehow, the newfound presence of Gerry's look made everything creepier. Ned wondered if

Gerry had ever been married. He wondered about all the different reasons for all the different people being here, coming here every night like he did.

Turning away and draining his beer, Ned quietly hoped to himself that he'd never be that old guy shamelessly staring at teenagers at the mall and the movie theater. He slapped a twenty on the bar, and then walked out the door without a word to anybody.

Ned saw Julie two more times that week and four more the next. It was usually the same group—three guys, four girls, each of which were matched with a go-to flirting partner, except for Julie. One of the other girls looked a bit like her, and Ned figured her for a sister, that maybe Julie was just brought to tag along, that maybe she was lonely too. Not that it mattered to Ned if she was matched up or not, he would tell himself. But every time he did, even he could see through his own bullshit. He could tell that he'd be lonelier than ever lying in bed that night. And he knew that he wasn't going to tell Skinner about Julie.

At his next appointment Ned kept steering the conversation away from Molly, which Skinner obviously found strange, but he just couldn't talk about her. So he brought up Gerry instead. He told Skinner about how weird he thought he was, telling him about how he leered at some young girl at the bar.

"Sounds like a real creep," Skinner said. He knew Ned was lying about something.

The worst part was that of course Skinner wouldn't say anything. If he grilled Ned and Ned stopped trusting him—felt that they weren't on the same side—then they'd never solve anything. So Skinner just sat there as Ned ate fifty minutes worth of guilt, leaving him feeling sick, alone with the thoughts of Julie as he got up to leave.

*

One day Tom poked his head into Ned's cubicle and mentioned something about the employee audits. Then he complimented Ned on an old photo of him and Molly making silly faces at the camera with beers in their hands.

"So Paula's got us going to this marriage counselor." Tom shook his head and set his coffee mug down on the table.

Ned wasn't sure where the hell this was coming from, but he wanted to say something along the lines of, "Who do you think you are, coming to me after six months because now you have problems?"

Ned took a sip from his own mug. "Well," he said after a moment, "do you want to grab dinner after heading out tonight?"

But Tom planned on going straight to the bar. "Midtown's got wings anyways, right?"

On the way in, Ned stopped to introduce Tom with Eddie, and then asked him if that Gerry guy had come in. "Naw, man," he said, holding up an ID to a kid with piercings in his nose, and then handing it back to him with it clipped between his fingers. "But your girl's here tonight."

"You have a girl?" Tom asked.

"It's no one," Ned said, leaving Eddie to his work and spotting her at one end of the bar. Ned sat them at his usual place which was at the far end from Julie's group, and Tom grabbed the bartender, skipping the wings and going straight for the whiskey.

"It's not that Paula wants a divorce," Tom said.

"Do you?"

"No." Tom set his drink down.

Down the bar Julie was watching her friend dance by herself, shaking her way up to and then away from the same kid who was sipping his beer but not taking his eyes off her. Julie had a shot in front of her, which she dipped her finger and tasted.

The boy being danced on turned away to talk to Julie. She smiled and swiveled her stool, leaned towards him. The blonde came back over and touched him on the shoulder, he put up his finger to Julie, and then was pulled onto the dance floor. Julie took her shot.

“It’s not like that.”

“Is it the kids thing?” It had been a year since they’d talked about it, but last Ned knew, they were still trying to get pregnant. But that felt like ages ago, Ned thought sipping his own beer. Julie got up and walked over to the old-timey jukebox, bouncing a hip as she flipped through the record pages. Ned was pretty sure Tom never answered him.

“The way I see it, counseling is one step away from a shrink,” Tom said, sliding the glass of brownish ice cubes between his hands on the bar. “And she’s not going to force a shrink on me.”

Ned took his glance away from Julie. “And why’s that?”

Tom took a sip of the whiskey and then breathed out through his nose like he was trying to taste it.

“The whole idea of it—it’s creepy. You walk out of the door after your session, with no idea who this person is. You just told them that your wife’s getting hot flashes and crying over pictures of us in our twenties, splotching tears on it so that I’ve got to take it down when my parents come over. I mean, I’ve got—” he stopped short and shook his head. “I’m just saying, who can you trust with that?” He picked out the ice cubes and put them in his mouth, sucking

and swishing them around as the bartender grabbed the Jack Daniels on his walk over and filled him up.

“Them,” Ned said once the bartender left. “You can trust them. They’re paid to be trustworthy.”

“Exactly. How can you really be invested in something if you’re doing it for the money? There’s helping a friend—like what you’re doing right now,” Tom said, gesturing to Ned with his recently filled whiskey glass. “Or, you can sell out. Sit there with a fucking notepad, nod your head, and pretend you care about someone.” He was already drunk enough that arguing was pointless, but Ned wasn’t sure he would have continued arguing anyways.

Tom got progressively drunker until it was obvious that Ned would have to drive him home, so Ned had stopped drinking after just the one. The conversation ended up settling on football. It had been so long since Ned had watched, but it felt good to think about something neutral. It felt pretty good to just listen to someone too. He knew better than to try and bring up Molly at this point. But he kept subconsciously steering the conversation towards the old days, hoping that he could say something about her even if just in passing.

After finishing another Jack, a devious smile spread across Tom’s face. “So, can I meet your girl?” Tom asked.

Ned took a swallow of the water he’d ordered, and then decided not to even turn to him. “You’re drunk.”

“No, I’m serious,” Tom said, and he was.

“Okay.”

“I’m just proud that you’re moving on,” he said, rubbing Ned’s back. “This is a big step.”

That's when Ned grabbed him by the collar. Tom kicked out in surprise trying to back away and his stool tipped over with him on it, crashing to the ground.

"Oh my God, is he okay?" Ned looked up and saw that Julie was standing over Tom. She was tipsy. She crouched down awkwardly, trying to keep her legs from opening in her skirt. Ned reached in quickly, threw Tom's arm around his shoulder and went to lift him up. As he did this his hand grazed against Julie's thigh.

"I've got it," Ned snapped. Julie clopped back in her heels, and Ned kept his eyes off her as he dragged Tom out of the bar.

After having Eddie help him into his car, calling Paula, dropping off Tom, and then driving home, Ned went straight to the freezer. The only alcohol he had in the house was a handle of Korski left over from before he'd started seeing Skinner and going to Midtown.

Ned took the bottle into his bedroom and sat on top of his bed with his knees folded, keeping his head on one arm and holding the Korski with the other. He drank on the bed, taking chugs of it until he was unable to keep himself propped up any longer.

He tipped over and hit the bed. The moonlight was enough that there was still light behind his closed eyelids. Old pictures and paintings dotted the walls, and spun in his mind, half in a memory of years ago. The curtain wafted, bringing in with it the spring air and the sound of leaves.

Ned slept until noon. He was going to be at least three hours late. Luckily Ned had been so drunk that he didn't even take off his shoes, so he could pretty much run straight out the door. Once he got to work he saw that Tom had made it. Looking like hell, but still, on time to work. Tom apologized.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ned said. “Let’s just not go back there anytime soon. I think Eddie was pretty pissed,” Ned lied.

Tom was in full agreement and they talked a bit more about how Paula had had to drive Tom to work today since his car was still at Midtown, and how he’d felt like a kid getting dropped off at school.

Later that day Ned had his appointment with Skinner, and he walked in, still with bed head and wearing yesterday’s clothes. Ned grabbed the water bottle and chugged the little thing, still feeling sick, but knowing it would help his headache.

“So how was the bar last night?”

“Skinner,” Ned said, as he spun the cap back on, “just don’t.”

Skinner nodded, dropping it immediately. “What would you like to talk about?” his even tone just agitated Ned more.

“I want to talk about Molly.”

“Okay,” Skinner said, “shoot.”

Ned didn’t say anything for a minute. “Never mind,” Ned said. “I don’t.”

Skinner was obviously surprised by this, and neither of them said anything for a while.

“Does anyone ever actually sit on that?” Ned eventually asked, tipping his head to the leather Freud-bed against the far wall. “Creeps me out. It reminds me of a mental institution.”

“I may be taking a stab in the dark here, but I feel as though you’re upset with me.”

Skinner shifted in his chair, and Ned didn’t respond. “It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything. You can just think.”

There was another silence.

“What are the chances that you would give me your home address?” Ned asked, and then shook his head as if annoyed by his own cryptic tone. “I mean, would you ever consider us friends?”

“Ned—” he said with his elbow still on the armrest, but his hand up in the air, unclenched, uncertain. “Why are you asking me this?”

“So, no,” Ned said. “What am I even here for?”

“I’m just trying to help you,” Skinner said as he folded his legs, and then unfolded them. “The therapy relationship is different from a friendship; it’s not based on reciprocity. You shouldn’t have to worry about me or my problems. For us to be effective, the focus has to be you.”

All of this made perfect logical sense, and it drove Ned crazy. He saw Skinner in a different light than he’d ever seen him in before.

Skinner didn’t care about Ned as a friend: This was true. Skinner helped him: Also true. Skinner’s life would change for better or worse if Ned just up and died in the middle of the night tonight: Probably not.

Ned got up and tossed the water bottle in the tiny trash can next to his chair. “Thirty free minutes for you.”

“Okay,” Skinner said in a raspy voice, and Ned walked out the door.

Eddie waved Ned through immediately after he arrived at the bar, and Ned took a seat, ordering a double whisky and a Long Island. There wasn’t any music playing when Ned slammed down the whisky glass, so the bang seemed louder than it really was. He looked around the room and there were a few faces looking back out of the corners of their eyes, one of which

was Julie's. Only a few seats down, her pupils were visible for a second before she snapped them away.

"What?" Ned said.

She turned to him and mumbled something that sounded like some sort of apology. He took a gulp of his Long Island and could smell the alcohol on his own breath when he put his head in his hands.

"Sorry," he said. "about last night, too."

She didn't respond, letting his apology hang in the air, and Ned was glad for this.

It took him less than fifteen minutes to down the Long Island, but he still couldn't stop thinking about Molly, or about the fact he had no one to talk with about her. He also couldn't stop glancing at Julie. So he ordered another one, downed that in fifteen minutes too, and then ordered another.

"Where are all your friends?" Ned said to Julie, who he now perceived as being here alone.

"Mitcherms," she said, and her voice sounded like a surreal version of the one he'd heard the night before. She was nodding her head with pursed lips. Ned had no idea what she said. "I mean, mid-terms," she said with forced clarity. "They're studying for them."

"None for you?"

"Maybe." She smiled at him, and her black eyes looked like a doll's.

"Bad girl," Ned said, immediately creeping himself out, but he was drunk enough to brush it off and slide his Long Island in front of her. She picked it up and seemed to be inspecting it for something, but after no more than a couple seconds started sipping from the straw.

“Yum.”

Julie was a horse. She downed two more Long Islands and a car bomb from Ned’s tab, and he was trying to keep up. They were the loudest people in the bar, but Ned barely noticed. He kept asking her if she thought he was old, and kept making her guess his age. She said lower numbers every time, eventually making it all the way down to ten. One o’clock came around and Julie told Ned that maybe she should go, but he held onto her hand, and whispered, “Come, on. It’s not a school night.” Julie giggled, probably because it actually was a Wednesday. But either way, she shouldn’t be walking alone at this time of night anyways, and then he offered her a ride.

She obliged him and after Ned settled the tab they got up to leave. On the way out, Eddie grabbed Ned by the arm, though Julie kept on walking.

“Be careful,” was all he said. Ned shook him off and jogged up to wrap his arm around Julie, turning her around towards his car. When she went to close the door of the car, she yanked the door-open latch, and almost took it clean off. Ned put his hand on her thigh and felt her warmth in his palm.

“So,” she said, her charcoal eyes sucking him in, “you’re, like, experienced?”

Ned barely heard the question, and he didn’t answer. Instead leaned in quickly and kissed her. She opened her mouth and kissed back like her tongue was angry. He closed his eyes and rested his hand on her sternum. Her heart vibrated in his hand for minutes.

As he rubbed the back of her head, clenching her hair between his fingers, she let go of his lips, leaned into his lap, and unzipped his pants. In between quiet moans, he whispered, “Thank you.” After a moment, upon hearing a gravelly footstep, Ned leaned forward off the headrest and forced open his eyes. The bartender had come out the side door with a garbage bag in each hand, walking them back to the dumpster and then wiping his hands on his jeans after

throwing them in. Julie's hair tickled his thighs. He fumbled with the window trying to roll it up, but the car wasn't on. He tried to feel only Julie's lips wrapped him, but he continued hearing the crickets and passing cars with startling clarity.

At the base of the main lamp post that lit the parking lot, someone was leaning with one leg back on it, looking down at his hands in front of his mouth, an orange ember breathing into life at the tip of a fresh cigarette. He let out a cloud of smoke that filled the cone of light above him and then flicked the used one towards Ned's car. Ned's groin was wet, like he had spilled something on it. And he realized he wasn't hard anymore. Looking down, he saw Julie asleep in his lap, with drool was spilling out of her mouth. Trying to support her neck, Ned propped her straight in her seat, but her head lulled to the side and smacked against the closed window. "Jesus," he said. After throwing his Civic into drive, he crackled along the driveway and slowly passed the lamp post to the front of the bar, where he took her out and set her in a chair next to Eddie's stool, then drove away.

Ned stayed away from Midtown for about a month after that, spending his nights with cheap frozen vodka and the quiet of the house. He learned not to call people anymore when he drank, instead seeing his Blackberry as something simply for work which he wouldn't even take out of his bag—an office supply no different from a stapler or paperweight. And all appointments with Skinner had gone on hiatus.

Work was different—he did talk to Tom more—which was nice—but only superficially. Ned was fine with this as he now wanted no reminders of Molly, even though he thought about her more than ever. Ned had been so drunk that night, that he didn't even remember if "Julie" ended up being the girl's real name or not. He was sure her friends would keep her away from

there once they found out what happened, or at least formed a story in their heads from pieces they'd hear from the bartender and some of the regulars who'd been there that night.

Eventually Ned came back to Midtown and sat down in the usual spot without ordering anything, just talking to the bartender. Eddie was on vacation apparently—Ned didn't know bouncers got vacations. Twenty minutes later, the bartender came by and set a bottle of Rasputin down in front of Ned.

"From the guy in the corner over there." Ned looked back and saw, at that same table, Gerry was sitting with sweat-covered hair and a Bullhead ball cap resting next to his beer. He had the speckled snow of a two day beard, and he gestured with a nod for Ned to come over. Ned brought the bottle over and sat down across from him, neither one saying anything for a moment or two.

"Sixteen," Gerry said on the tail end of a sip from his glass.

"What?" Ned said.

"When you're here as much as us, and when you watch as careful as I do, you get curious." He fixed his hat on, perhaps waiting for a reply, but none came. "That little thing that started coming in around a month and a half ago, the one you left sprawled on the chair like a de-stringed marionette. Looked in her wallet that night," he said through a bitten cigarette he'd stuck in his mouth. "She's sixteen."

Ned put the beer down on the table and slowly put his face in his hands.

"She kept the real ID stuffed in between some gift cards to Dairy Queen and Victoria's Secret." He wheezed out a laugh, leaking smoke that stabbed the back of Ned's throat. "Wasn't even a real license neither—one of those temporary ones where Daddy's got to be next to her in the front seat."

Gerry kept on laughing and Ned got up, leaving the beer there full. He speed-walked to his car, and peeled out of the gravel lot. Driving as fast as he could down the starlit back roads, Ned searched through his Blackberry—whitepages.com. Eventually he pulled over to the shoulder across from the address of some Gerald Skinner who apparently lived there.

Chances that this was Skinner's actual house were zero. The windows were down and Ned heard the crickets and smelled the summer as he leaned his seat back as far as he could, almost all the way, waiting for he didn't know what.

Restless

I am not the ADD kid. I can't speak for any other people who have the disorder, and I can't speak for everyone else who has stereotypes of it, but when I picture someone with ADD, honestly, I can only picture a child. It's someone with dark, unkempt hair who's for some reason wearing a horizontal striped shirt with loud colors, definitely a trouble-maker—not bad necessarily, just not the person you'd want to hang out with, not your best friend. He's the kid who refuses to slow down and who just won't listen. See, I've got stereotypes too, and I don't think I'm any of them. Now I'm not saying I'm anyone else with the disorder, but nevertheless, the ADD kid is out there, bothering teachers and sticking crayons up his nose. So for the rest of our time together, let's just excise me from whatever you think about people with ADD and start fresh.

I remember the day I was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. It was in the fifth grade, and my mom and I were standing in the elevator lobby of the twelfth floor of the Cleveland Clinic. People walked back and forth as we waited, hanging up the pay phones or checking in their kids for appointments, then going to sit inside the glass-walled waiting room.

This new guy, Dr. Mannos, had just informed me that I'd be taking a medicine called Metadate, and that it was going to change the way I acted, make me better with details and make it so I wouldn't have to sit on my leg so much during class. I looked up and asked my mom how long I was going to have to take it for. The longest I'd ever been on a medication was the Zyrtec for my allergies, but even with that I wouldn't take for a whole year at a time simply because I

fell out of habit. Sinus infections, I'd take Augmenton, a nasty cue ball of a pill, for two weeks, more if it persisted. Simethicone for an upset stomach. Benadryl for allergies.

"Well," she said. "You're probably not going to stop."

That was the weirdest part. Before she answered, I had assumed maybe a year, maybe till Junior high, and the word "college" could barely be comprehended in terms of time. But when she said this to me, an image of my future-self came to my mind: A forty year old man who vaguely looked like my dad, hunched over a desk covered with papers, just like his was at home. There were pills there too, scattered in with the papers maybe or bottled in one of the drawers.

At the time, I didn't know that my mom had been talking with Dr. Mannos about medication options for my dad. It was kept a secret and when I asked what she was talking about with Dr. Mannos at the end of the sessions when I got sent out to the lobby to play Gameboy, she said she was asking about things for an adult, a friend of hers who I didn't know.

In the mental images I have of my dad he's either wearing running shorts and a windbreaker, with an old maroon ski mask on top of his head walking in the door smelling of sweat and muscle rub after a run; that or him passed out for entire days on his marmalade-stained comfy chair, surrounded by dismembered newspapers, with a golf tournament blasting on the TV. He's a skinny guy who has compulsively run long distances his entire life, and who worked as a nurse in the psych unit for more than twenty-five years.

Like many sons, I am annoyingly similar to my father, and like many sons I find my father to be a difficult person to live with. For one thing, he hoards. Exuding mess like it's a superpower, he needs less than twenty minutes to deface a hotel room or clean car he's borrowing. Walking through the house, we trip over boxes whose contents are strictly disassembled lanterns; and aged newspaper clippings cover the floor of our living room like it

was a serial killer's, whose sick obsessions were the daily jumble and Slylock Fox. "He gets distracted," my mom says. "—Can't stay on one thing long enough to see it through."

As I've grown up, he's been able to shoulder less and less responsibility. We're always dragging him around by the arm like a distracted child. When he drinks—which is often—this is especially so. He doesn't hit anyone; he just slurs his words after a Zima and a half, and then makes a fool of himself in front of the family at parties. He pees on the side of our van and scolds my mom's driving while slumping beneath his seatbelt in the passenger's seat.

I don't think he has ever been early for something of his own accord. Family friends have coined the term "Moeckel Time," meaning whatever time our family says we'll be somewhere, and then adding an hour. Whenever we tried to leave for our annual road trip to Martha's Vineyard, the last four hours of loading the car involved my mom guess-packing my dad's clothes while my dad went between watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, asking my sister, Jo, or I to throw the glow-in-the-dark Frisbee around for a sec, and rummaging through the house in attempts to find the bag that held the straps for the snail luggage-carrier, as it had disappeared since the year before.

And it's not just that, once we got on the island, a night or two would end with Jo and me sitting in the dark, Indian style on our respective twin-beds, having run out of angry words to say about him. We could just picture him lying there tipsy, half-asleep, down on the first floor by himself, surrounded by hoarded shit, food on ottomans, and a TV blasting the *X-Files*. He could still surprise us with his paranoia and denial—his stubborn hold on the idea that my mother had turned us against him.

I have a memory of Lambert's Cove beach, with my mother reading a paperback copy of *Is It You, Me, or Adult A.D.D.? Stopping the Roller Coaster When Someone You Love Has*

Attention Deficit Disorder, leaned back in her sunhat, page-flipping through it like one of her mysteries. “I just have to keep telling myself, ‘He’s mentally ill, he’s mentally ill.’” That was her mantra.

There’s an interesting distinction between mental illness and personality—the psychological definition of personality being, “The psychological qualities that contribute to an individual’s enduring and distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving.” And a mental illness is, “Any of various conditions characterized by impairment of an individual's normal functioning caused by social, psychological, genetic, or other factors.”

The concept of the mental disorder is based on impairment from normality—it assumes that there is a normal and separate person inside there somewhere. The disorder is like an extraneous cyst on a person that once removed, would allow the sufferer to be “himself.” In other words, the crazy person is not a murderer, his schizophrenia is. If he was thinking clearly, he would never have killed anyone.

It’s not you, it’s not me, it’s the ADD.

If that was the case though, then there is an unblemished version of my dad deep down in there somewhere, someone who realized the discomfort and pain he’s caused us. I am curious as to what my actual dad looks like. Because, honestly, I don’t think he exists. To me, he is the symptom.

Permanence is, on the other hand, the defining nature of personality—the psychology that’s consistent over time and situation. Despite how the environment is acting on a person, or how old he is, or if he’s recently lost a parent, or had a fight with his spouse, or is just lying down for bed after a long day, this is how he is.

Unlike my father, I grew up with the diagnosis firmly in place, and thus have absorbed it and the medication for it as part of my identity. I've never been the most socially comfortable person, you could say. In high school my interactions with people would be planned and planned out beforehand, then hopefully I would say something funny, then I'd think and think about how I fucked up or did *so great* at the lunch table today. My mom had always told me that if the Adderall, my prescription stimulant for my ADD, made me more comfortable in certain situations, then she said I should take it—all it was doing was helping my brain to function a bit more efficiently, like everyone else's. There was no reason I should be denied that. And for a long time, I wasn't.

Looking back it seems as if every other time I took an Adderall around my mom, I'd end up performing half hour conversation-speeches at her, following her around the house as she did various chores, preaching about how good it was to finally feel normal. And it did feel good. It slowed everything down so that I could live in real time, live without the constant speed of anxiety, yet be able to fast-forward through the pointless ruminations and endless self-doubt. It was every joke coming out clear without the hindrance of shoddy brain wiring. I started taking it for soccer games junior year of high school—the doctor herself had said it can improve sports performance—just to clear things up a bit. Then I'd take it for practice too, and bring a short acting pill with me for the lapse between school and practice, when we'd all hang out at Phil's who lived nearby.

I have this memory from back then of, after school, stomping through the cluttered rooms of my house, upturning piles of papers and clanking in circles the plastic carousel that was supposed to hold everyone's pills, and finding my medicine nowhere. Eric had just called unexpectedly to tell me that he and Phil were on their way over, and my school dose was about

to wear off. When I couldn't find any, I remember resigning myself to staring into the wicker basket where I usually kept my own pills, and trying to breathe deeply. I told myself that my friends liked me for me, not for the comments I made, or the pills I took.

I can't remember if I ever found my medication or not, or if I lied and told Eric I was busy, or if I had a good time that night just being myself and enjoying the company of good friends. All I know is that it wasn't until college that I stopped taking ADD medication specifically for social interaction. My eye still stays on the clock when I know it's wearing off, and I'd be lying if I said it doesn't affect where I choose to be when the transformation occurs.

There is a person under all the abnormality of a mental disorder that we're trying to dig down to, and ADD is a mental disorder. I started wondering, if the treatments that find my actual self are only temporary, then where do I go once the medicine wears off for the night?

When I used to bounce my knees in church, my mother would lean into me, hands still prayer-folded in her lap, and whisper, "Do you need an Adderall?" She always kept a small pharmacy in her purse for emergencies, but as time went on I wouldn't take it. I started cutting down the doses as low as I could into halves and three-quarters of short acting pills. My dad, on the other hand, would seek her out to tell her in a low voice that he realized he hadn't taken his second Vivance today, did she have any in her purse?

Taking two long acting Vivance a day keeps it in your system for 16-24 hours, so maybe it was its side effect of insomnia that kept him from ever actually going to bed, but I'm pretty sure he didn't before that either. I'd always have to wake him up when I came down to eat breakfast, finding him passed out in his seat in the dining room, hand in his pants and leftovers wrapped in tin foil sitting in the toaster oven.

Once, my mom, dad, and I were visiting Jo and her boyfriend, Seth, down in Florida where she went to grad school for occupational therapy. I flew in from Columbus for the long Memorial Day weekend and my parents from Cleveland for about a week, so it was like a little vacation. The windows of her bungalow were closed in order to keep in the A/C, but you could still see the palm trees in the yard outside and the sun shone through them. Jo, Seth, and I were all sitting on the couch watching TV, the furniture and white walls all smelling like a new house, maybe just because they were new to me. My dad slapped into the room barefoot and shirtless from the guest bedroom not far away, in which you could see newspapers laid out across the bed if you looked through the crack of the door. He asked if he could borrow some Adderall from me.

I always hated when he brought up anything related to the ADD—medicines, or psychiatry appointments, or habits. Even excluding all of the inner troubles I'd had with it, right from the start my ADD was always a soft spot—a source of shame—something I wanted to keep separate from how people saw me. I didn't tell someone unprovoked that I had ADD and took medication for it for six years. I remember once at Y-camp, a doughy kid with a curly brown hair asking me if I had ADHD. Just hearing the letters out loud sounded somehow distasteful, and I'd said no.

I did not even look at my dad when I said, "Yeah, okay."

He went away for a moment, but came back in a moment to ask where it was.

"Bookbag," I said.

"What?"

"It's in my bookbag."

He said thanks, and then went back into his room.

Looking back on it now, I know he didn't take many—maybe six or seven short-acting tablets of ten milligrams. He took a higher dosage than me, because he was bigger, older, and his symptoms were worse. His ADD went untreated for fifty years, and not surprisingly, it had progressed. He was in more need of it than I was, so he took it more often, for lesser tasks like maybe mowing the lawn when I only used it for homework. But when a day or two later I looked into my pill bottle and could see green plastic speckling from beneath the powdery blue pills, I was infuriated. All I could imagine was my dad—the ADD kid. His hands stuffed in the cookie jar, little fingers probably still blue with resin from stimulants that he popped like Smarties.

Later that day, lying on the couch, I stopped him as he walked by and asked how many he'd taken.

"Five or six," he said.

"That's a week's worth supply for me," I lied. "The bottle is practically empty. You can't just take that many. I need those," I said, and that's when I felt it. Like we were bickering over who got the biggest piece of pie after dinner. Except instead of pie we were scrapping over prescription stimulants.

After blindly and constantly resenting him for the pain he caused my mom, my sister, and me, I now felt the extent of my weakness in being reliant on the Adderall—that extent being that I was as bad as my dad. Hot with shame, the realization of how fundamentally alike we truly were swept over me. And in that moment, I wanted so badly for him to disappear.

Not too long ago I was on the phone with my mom, asking her what my teachers had said about me, and what made her think I had ADD. Mrs. Beers had told my mom once that I had problems with falling out of my chair during class, and I'd had the faintest memory of doing this

to impress the freckled girl who sat next to me in first grade. I didn't remember being "turned around in my chair, entertaining the rest of the class," when we were supposed to be filling out our diaries, but I did remember starting to get stickers every time I actually completed an entry, and that every three stickers, my parents would take me to a movie (I saw *Mousehunt*, and it was awesome). I remembered in third grade the teacher having to sign my assignment notebook to check that I'd written everything down, and I remembered being aware that I was the only one walking up to Ms. Bystrome's desk at the end of the day. In fourth grade, I remembered that my mom and I had become good enough friends with the janitors to get them Christmas presents, because they had keys to all the classrooms which locked at 4:30, often with my homework still inside. I remembered never being able to sit still.

For most of my life I looked back on fifth grade as the year of Mrs. Wunderlich—my favorite teacher, the only person to make thinking and classwork interesting, my role model who I still put down as a reference for job applications. Twenty-five plus years teaching grade school, and the district's teacher for the AT class (academically talented) for double-digit years. That night, my mom told me about how Mrs. Wunderlich had called my parents at home and said, *I have so few times recommended medication for kids in my life, but I think that Ian needs it*, which I did not know.

For so long, I had tried to separate myself from this illness, its weakness, and its associations with my dad. But it seems as if I have always been this way. A bit of the ADD kid swimming around inside me. Reliant on the medicine forever. Permanence.

I wonder now what he thinks about our connection with ADD and medication. I wonder if he's proud that he and I share this thing I so greatly despise. Maybe he sees it as a deep, biological and social bond like the ones in real life I've never entertained the notion of. I answer

him in scoffs or by ignoring him. I wonder if he can tell how I feel sometimes, and if it kills him inside that I even shy away from hugs after a visit home.

Maybe the ADD isn't a weakness or disadvantage. Maybe I don't have to be so resentful of his actions. Perhaps I don't have to be ashamed.

Back on the phone with my mom, I could hear her bickering with someone over when exactly I started the medication, referring to it as "the big change." There was an echo of my dad's voice in the background, and she paused to listen to him.

"Dad says something about you guys playing catch together in the living room, and memorizing vocab words." Despite how little I think about it, the memory isn't hard to retrieve. It was fourth grade Science, a year before I started the medicine, and I was learning words like "stamen" and "pistil." We cleared away chairs and videotapes from the living room floor so I had a catching radius, and sometimes I'd wait with the blue rubber ball in my hands thinking through how I was going to explain to him what chlorophyll was before throwing it back. He'd throw the ball short every once in a while near the big green comfy chair, and I remember springing for it as hard as I could.

Word Salad

Attempting to accurately convey the schizophrenic for an audience would be impossible. “The schizophrenic” is in itself a flawed term. It suggests that one case could be representative of the entire disease, which is impossible. In fact, it is difficult even to pin schizophrenia down to one essential definition. Sometimes consistent over time and sometimes erratic, the symptoms vary from voices in the head to paranoid delusions to utter emotionlessness to catatonic stupors. Meaning “split mind,” it is as if schizophrenia exists as an acceptance of its own anti-uniformity. Just an abstraction for the indefinable. A catch-all for insanity.

Before just recently, it had been years since Eric had written anything. Enjoying a certain amount of success right out of undergrad and into grad school, his concise and macabre sensibilities as an author—along with the signature paragraph-long headers that piqued a quick interest in his readers—had found him a niche following in the nonfiction community, and had earned him enough money that when, at 27, he had his first schizophrenic break, he was able to stay afloat for a while without steady work. And his wife at the time, Sandra, helped him with the hurtles of everyday functioning. Swelling and shrinking over the course of five years, his symptoms breathed in and out of him an insanity comprised of broken words and inappropriate emotion. Being a writer, the worst part for Eric had always been what psychologists refer to as word salad—the phenomenon in some schizophrenics where speech devolves into randomness without any sense of context. It might happen mid-conversation, words and topics suddenly tumbling down like pebbles in a rockslide. The rhythm of normal speech maintains exactly, but the meaning itself slips away.

But one day, Eric stumbled across an idea that was novel to the entire world. He began making notes in the margins of his original manuscripts, underlining ideas he could expand upon. And slowly, he was overcome with a deep sense of understanding and opportunity.

As a nonfiction writer, Eric had always seemed able to squeak meaning out of damn near anything. He was a fine observer of the world, and looked at things in ways that would surprise his readers. But since that first psychotic break, for better or for worse, people could no longer relate.

So now, he had his mind on fiction. Yes, it was true that unless stated otherwise fiction obeyed the laws of physics, and all the normal mores and stigmas were still in place. But less can be assumed. People tended not to fill in the blanks of poorly written fiction—that was the author's job. In fiction, problems grew as an inherent part of the world—those problems being the whole reason for that world's existence. People said that Eric built his own little world. Well why couldn't he build it for them too?

One thing Eric hadn't decided yet was whether he'd continue taking the pills or not. As he'd been flipping through the work he'd done during his diagnosis, a disturbing pattern emerged to him. There was a visible devolution in his work from live, vibrating prose, to lists and single-sentence entries as his Thorazine had begun taking effect. While it was true that this current sense of clarity had come while on the medication, he could feel that something was just out of reach. Something bigger than himself.

So for the moment he thought at his desk, in front of him resting a long rectangular pill case with seven compartments labeled Su, Mo, Tu, We, Th, Fr, Sa, aligned parallel to an open notebook that had been sitting there empty for a long time.

*

Su:

Walking through the courtyard as he liked to do on Sundays that presented him with the opportunity, Eric conversed with his greatest and oldest friend Dean. Oldest friend not in the sense that Eric had known the man longer than any other person he might decide to call “friend,” but rather in the sense that he was Eric’s friend of the highest age, 66 as opposed to Eric’s 32. The twist of phrase was a running joke between the two and it was rare for Eric to address Dean as anything other than some variation of “My oldest friend.” In reality, the duo had only known each other about eighteen months. But if you asked Eric, he’d say that their friendship stretched back for years, because to him, that’s what it felt like.

The sun was out, and Eric could taste the humidity with each breath. Bees buzzed in the distance busy with their pollen, and the atmosphere was filled with the aroma of Eric’s favorite flower. The temperature was obviously bothering Dean who seemed to be in a constant state of itching and adjusting himself. Dean wore a suit almost everywhere he went—even on days as hot and undemanding as this—since he had accumulated so many over the years, and always said that not wearing them would be closeting good taste.

They had been discussing the prospect of Eric returning to the page and even though Eric didn’t want to admit it, getting Dean’s approval meant a lot. So far it wasn’t going well—just more talk of pills, pills, pills—key to happiness—pills.

“I’m happy when I write,” Eric said.

“Yes,” Dean said, “I forgot how notoriously cheery and even-keeled writers are.”

Eric explained to him that that was only because writing attracts the downtrodden and ruminative. It doesn't make them that way. "Correlation does not equal causation," he said, as if ending any further discussion. But Dean's sweat beaded mustache did a poor job of hiding the disagreeable slant in his lips.

They walked for a moment in silence.

"Old friend," Eric said. "I am tainted. What I'm trying to tell you is that that puts me in an interesting authorial position."

"A position where you somehow think that writing will be good for your mental health?"

"Like you said, 'Pills equal mental health,' and you know I take my pills. So that's not even the issue. The issue is this." Eric took in a shallow breath from the humid air, and then went on to explain his recent thoughts on the differences between fiction and nonfiction.

Dean gave him a look that said if he didn't get to the point soon he was going to bop him over the head with the nearest tree branch he could find.

"My world is like a fiction of the mind, and my affliction is the author. How can I not embrace that? How can doing that be false? How can writing fiction not show them *my* truth?"

"No matter how hard you try and evade the 'world of non-fiction,'" Dean said, "*in* that world, you have schizophrenia. Even if what you write is no stranger than some post-modern blather jotted by a girl in her bathroom trying to capture the unknowable pain of acne and boys named Johnny, you will be an experiment," he said. "After reading it, they won't empathize or understand, they'll poke and prod. They'll call you crazy."

"Not if I can reach them, Dean. Not if I can change their minds," Eric said, looking up at Dean. "Not if I can change Sandra's mind."

Dean gave a deep breath, continuing to look forward as they walked. “I suppose if you’re convinced that this is the only way to get to her, then I won’t argue. I just don’t want you to be hurt by people who won’t understand you,” he said turning back to Eric. “But, maybe, maybe you could make them.”

Eric smiled up at Dean, and Dean, after a wipe of his sleeve across his forehead, smiled back.

You see Eric met Dean around the time of the divorce with Sandra, and Dean was quite integral in his recovery. Although, Sandra and Dean had yet to meet.

Sandra left Eric after seven years of marriage and more years before. She left because she was sick and tired of it. She was tired of the hospital visits, the progressively elongating stretches of Eric’s catatonic disinterest—disinterest in her as a woman or wife or as a person for that matter; because Eric’s crying in confusion as she laid down on the bed next to him as the big spoon and held him in her arms made her more weary than it did sad, because the nights of staying up and talking on that very same bed and listening to Eric’s undeniable gift for conversation had disappeared with the rest of his mind, because of his inconsistency and inability to stay on his medication and to stay on it longer than a few weeks without giving up because it takes longer than that to kick in and you know that, Eric, the doctors have told you, Eric, for the love of God or your love of me or even if you don’t love me anymore, please, either way, please take your pills.

Sandra, though, was not all the way gone to Eric, still visiting him on Mondays and Wednesdays, she came over after her nearby, bi-weekly spin class. She’d check in on his pill-taking, cleanliness, and general welfare, every once in a while dusting off the old photos and framed copies of Eric’s published essays she’d left there.

Mo:

It was the day after his walk in the courtyard, and Eric sat at the desk in his bedroom with the empty and slightly yellowed yet quite writeable notebook, and a rare smirk on his face. He had slept well the night before—the best in a long time actually.

The knocker tapped, and Eric shot a look down the hall. Over on the desk was sitting his pill case with the Su: and Mo: compartments still full. Eric knew how bad things could get if Sandra found full compartments on days they should be empty. Quickly, Eric grabbed both days' worth of pills and shoved them in his pocket, before jogging over to answer the door.

The knocker was a brass fixture of a man's face where the nose hangs free from the rest, free to smack against the protruding lips as hard as one wished. She, however, was gentler about it, lifting the nose all the way up past its tipping point and tapping it against the metal man's forehead. This was how Eric knew it was Sandra; she had done it as long as he'd known her. He opened the door and she walked in.

Her mid-length blonde hair was up in a ponytail and she was in workout spandex, her old sleeveless cutoff hiding neither her sports bra nor the shape of the breasts it cupped. As she walked in and gave him her familiar weak smile—a smile that did only a fair job at hiding behind it what bitter love had remained, still clenching to the pre-schizophrenia Eric—he could smell her familiar sweat and he remembered how it would drip off of her during love making. They'd had sex almost every night, even years into the marriage it never slowed down. Sandra liked it best up against the wall and that's where Eric best liked to give it to her. As they finished Sandra might shake in his arms and mutter senseless words in strings at a time. He could literally fuck her stupid.

—Sandra's smile flattened and she looked away, scratching her head. At some point, the sense of sinister pleasure Eric was feeling had drawn itself all over his facial expression. Then the memory of making love to this woman that he still loved, who now stood in his doorway, became sacred and beautiful and distant. Eric's wide smile teetered into blankness. Distant is precisely what that concept and idea was, as in the final year or two before the divorce, they hadn't had any sex life whatsoever, Eric's sex drive having been almost totally drained as a side-effect of his medication. Their conversations rarely went any deeper than his pill regiment, strict patterns of question/answer dialogue concerning Sandra's job as a photographer for the local paper, and that night's new television programs.

After Sandra came all the way in and took off her shoes, Eric followed her about the apartment and they engaged in broken conversation as she checked to make sure the birdfeeder stuck with suction cups outside his window was full, and his toilet was not overflowed, and finish off the dishes if there weren't too many. After entering the bedroom Sandra's eyes grazed along with her hand over the correctly emptied pill case on the desk and Eric plopped down on the messy old bed.

When they were still together, in that bed—despite the sentiments present in Eric's recent trip to the memory of this bedroom—apart from sleeping, most of their time was spent talking. Often it was pillow talk after sex, often it lead to sex, and often it did both, but it was those tired times in between that Eric used to enjoy most and probably Sandra too. They talked about their ideas for their future, for themselves and for the other.

Eric would shift around on the bed but usually end up flat on his stomach with his chin on the pillow, and in the meantime bounce around essay ideas, asking Sandra for inspiration then whispering to her that she was his, and they would laugh at the corniness of the statement, but

know it was true. She always told him he was going to write something important, and as their time together wore on he believed her. Sandra might tell him about her desires to go to different countries around the world and to take pictures of people living. She talked about the people as if they were the places themselves and she'd orient their bodies, in her eyes, to be a map.

So she stood now, there in the room, giving a long and silent look at Eric sitting with his legs crossed on top of the bed's rumpled sheets. And Sandra, more likely than not, was thinking and pondering over a certain memory related to it. It was after they had lain down for the evening, fairly late in the run of their marriage and fairly late in the run of the night. The moon had brightened the room and Sandra watched the consistent movements of her husband's breathing go up and down—something which used to bring her a warm contentedness, but more recently, either because Eric was so rarely peaceful enough for them to lay quiet in bed together for enough time for something like contentedness to brew, or simply because she didn't look at Eric as often as she used to, she was brought this image and feeling less and less. But the feeling was there now and Sandra tapped him on his bare back. He turned over with the ease and instead of fuzzy, as she had expected, his expression was refined—an expression of someone who had never been asleep in the first place.

Her voice cracked through hours of non-vocal residue as she told him how lately she'd been considering this weird question, unable to recall how it got in her head. It was that if she could only take one more picture, of anything, anywhere, in any way, what would it be? His eyes were visible to her own long-adjusted pupils, and their gaze seemed direct during the post-question pause.

With a budding smile, she said it would be in Italy. After setting the ten second timer and putting the camera down on an old rock bench she imagines being there, she would run over to

him. In hopes of creating the illusion that they could and were holding up the leaning tower of Pisa, they'd extend their arms and make anguished faces.

"No," Eric said. "Stop. Not in there. Because, you know, it's hot in there sometimes. It's not nothing, but into our minds—to my mind, my mind, my mind, my mind."

He furrowed his brow and pawed at her sleeve as the words came out, and she buried her face in her pillow.

"So," Sandra said from across the room, looking down at his pill case and the adjacent notebook, "Who's Dean?"

Eric got up from the bed and walked over to see the word "Dean" heading the otherwise blank page of the notebook. Eric had forgotten he'd written that down so before answering in a possibly disorganized way to Sandra, he considered her question deeply. Eric knew Dean was his friend—a friend in a courtyard who wore suits and was often hot. These were facts. But also, he just plain liked the name Dean—a flexible name, he thought. Good enough to be the character based on himself for his story.

"He's going to be a character in a new story that I'm writing," Eric said.

"Really," she said as her eyes rose to his. "You're writing again?"

Eric nodded and she looked back down to the page, pursing her lips and feigning disinterest.

"An actual story or one of those little header things?"

"It'll have both, like usual," she nodded her head and smiled. "And it'll be fiction this time," Eric said, and she continued nodding without removing her eyes from the page.

"Dean," she said. "I like that name."

“You could be in it too if you want,” Eric said. “Or at least a character based on you.”

“Oh, you don’t have to put me in,” she said twirling her ponytail. “I’m just glad that you’re writing again.”

“On second thought,” he said, moving behind her so they were both facing the desk. “I really don’t think I have a choice to keep you out of it. Besides, it would be interesting, I think, for you to meet Dean on the page.” Sandra clicked closed the two open days of the pill case and moved out from under him over to the bed where she began pulling up the sheets.

“You should read me something,” she said and then smiled back over her shoulder as she made the bed. “How about that one with the place?”

Eric laughed at the intentional vagueness but, of course, he knew which one she was talking about. “A Place I Visit Often,” it was called. Sandra liked it because she had been present for its entire conception so long ago in the college dorms—knocking aside her own homework and lying with Eric on his dorm-room bunk as he wrote. She’d even helped with a few lines at the time, which was the main reason Eric still enjoyed it at all.

He had known the two paragraph blurb by heart from reading it to her so many times but she walked over to the desk as Eric walked to the bed, and reached in the drawer to grab one of his old journals—that being his oldest—which catalogued a lot of his peripheral work. After handing it to him she sat down on the bed and scooted closer to him so she could peak her head over the page and read while he spoke.

She beamed as his voice flowed about the room as it had in the past, but Eric felt something totally different. While reading the old piece like a memorized prayer, he heard the sound of his voice and its old words ending in a hollow distance, creeping into the cracks of the walls and disappearing.

When he stopped talking Sandra's look of pleasure appeared jolted, and she looked around in apparent confusion. "That was very nice," she said, standing up and brushing over the wrinkles of where she had just sat. "Well good luck then. See you on Wednesday." She didn't wait for a response, leaving Eric in the room where he sat, listening to her put on her shoes and walk out the door.

Eric, motionless, sunk into his spot on the bed, holding the journal for half of an hour, pondering what she had been thinking and why she had left so abruptly. Then, walking over to the bathroom, Eric took the pills out of his pocket. He dropped them into the toilet and flushed them away.

Tu:

Eric awoke that morning ready to write, and found it easier to throw away the pills than it had been the day before. Besides he didn't like the idea of putting that stuff in his body just before sitting down to write. It gave him tremors in his hands sometimes, and plus it was bad for creativity. The bottle should say, "Do not drive, operate heavy machinery, or try to think outside the box while using this drug."

The writing experience for Eric, as for any writer, was painful and dreadful and wonderful, but also painful, as well as dreadful. The plan was to get as much on the page as fast as possible. Normally Eric liked to pace himself, but he knew he needed get a first draft of this story down in a couple days before this clarity could escape him.

Traditionally, nonfiction was much less narrative than fiction. It tended to be more focused on an idea, with the voice of the writer-at-the-desk never too far away, working with the reader to make meaning out of a memory or concept. You were allowed to tell. But trying to tell

people what he thought never worked, that's why Eric did it so rarely these days. In fiction, on the other hand, you showed. Instead of telling them about his world, he could present it to them. If they were able to look around for themselves, then perhaps certain people would be able to connect better with schizophrenics, get along with them, maybe even learn to love them.

Though, Eric would have been happy if he got just a chunk of the eighty percent of people to stop thinking that schizophrenia just meant multiple personality disorder—which it was completely different from. Also, it wasn't even called multiple personality disorder, but dissociative identity disorder. It was as if people were mislabeling the place they didn't even bother looking.

After taking a deep breath and cracking his knuckles, Eric began to write.

Dean was to be his main character and he was to be a man with schizophrenia. Eric wondered what love was to an insane person, and he wondered what Dean's thoughts on this would be, and wondered what other people would think. People would think that insanity leaves no room for stable concepts—that love didn't exist for them. Or maybe they would think that as the hills and valleys of the schizophrenic's mental landscape suffer through dopaminergic earthquakes and crack and fall into the earth, feelings like love and fear are all that remains—the invisible force of gravity that hides in and around all of the earthly chaos. Would they think that this world and all of its parts freeze during a catatonic stupor? Eric wonders if he would be able to, in this crumbling world, look up at the sky while feeling the heat radiate beneath the chunk of planet that had been sinking to the core just before it froze, if he would be able to jump and crawl from the falling pieces and move them as he wished, if he could grab at the gravity that is “love” and feel it hold him by the hand and take him to another place where things moved again and people held each other in their arms. He wonders about the large door that will stand there in the

side of a mountain, the only feature of the place, and how it will be labeled “Schizophrenia.”

Upon entering the door and finding himself in a red room with clay walls inside of the mountain, he will see two people, the figure on the left, Sandra, on the right, Dean. As in a dream he will be privy to some mysterious context—this being that they are both him, and he will fear for them as he fears for himself. They will each be wearing men’s casual clothing and their hair will be clipped and shaved down to an exact match of his own, all the way down to his sandy blonde facial hair. Their bodies will be a bit different, disfigured into features he associates with himself, like the hooked nose he noticed in himself in a three-way mirror and will never forget, and the earlobes which blend down into the side of the face. “Schizophrenia means ‘split mind,’” they will say. “Split personalities. That is all you are. Sane/Insane.” He, he on the left, and he on the right will all then realize that the only essence of the gravity around them is that of fear. But only the single “he” will feel it. He will cry out for Sandra, but it won’t be heard. A giant bowl of salad will dump down on him from the roof of the red room, spinach and craisins raining, and he will scream as the other two eat him up, piece by piece, with tiny chilled forks, exchanging conversation as they do so.

We:

Eric awoke in his bed with queasiness sifting through his stomach, and an ache pounding in his head. Walking to the bathroom he saw that the notebook on his desk was crumpled and had words scribbled across the visible pages. Next to the notebook was the pill case. Su, Mo, and Tu empty; it must be We.

Eric stood, leaning over the table and thumbing through last night’s work with one hand. With the other hand, he clicked open We and stuck his finger inside, spinning the pills in a circle

so that they clacked against the plastic. He had the feeling every writer loves to get when reading over their work—the feeling that the piece existed almost independently of him, that it had the necessary parts, without his having to insert ideas or subconsciously fill in blanks, to carry him from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, image to dialogue to thought to description.

He slid the pills out of the case, walked them to the bathroom, and then dumped them into the bowl. On returning to the desk, Eric slowed to a halt, studying through a consistent headache what was written in his pages. He stood there for an hour, at first enjoying what he saw and then enjoying nothing, leaning on the tabled pill case like a hand rail.

It was the disturbance of the phone that awakened him and forced him to re-realize his headache, and it was Dean who was on the other end of the ear piece. After exchanging hellos and pleasantries, Eric squinted and tried to rub his head pain away while offering the idea for the two of them to meet up. Dean replied that today was Wednesday, Sandra's day. He couldn't impose.

"Anyways, the only reason I called was to check in on the writing. You know, what's it about, how many pages," Dean said, "how you feel."

"Headache," Eric said rubbing his eyes and letting out a breath as if it were an exhaust release. "But it's like a good headache, a productive headache. I've been moving so fast on this story."

"Well, I'm sure you'll take a day off and give the old eyes a rest," Dean said.

"Doubt it. I'm writing well right now—a rest is the opposite of what I need. I'm starting to see things. This is the most important thing I've ever written, Dean. The truest thing I've ever written, and I'll show it to everyone. That's what good fiction does—it finds the relatable in the

fabricated particular, in the extraordinary. Good fiction can change things, can change people. It can act as a catalyst for new perspective.”

“I just don’t understand what’s wrong with your old perspective,” Dean said and his voice, along with the silence that followed, crackled through the speaker.

“Well,” Dean came back, “I’m just saying, if you’re feeling sick—”

“I’m feeling fine, Dean. I’m better than before,” Eric said and then stopped, tracing the line of grainy wood between the notebook and pill case with his finger.

“Okay well I’ve thought about it, and I at least want to be there for you if you’re going to write,” Dean said. “You could read me something, if you’d like. And I could tell you what I think.”

“Absolutely,” Eric said, “Let’s do it right now.” Before Eric was ready, he heard the tap of the knocker, and then hung up and left to answer it—from the desk to the door—because Dean had already gone.

Upon looking through the peep hole, Eric could see a fish-eye version of Sandra’s face floating behind the door. Pulling back his eye, he opened it.

She asked how it was going as she came in and hugged him, and it was the first time he’d felt her breasts on any part of his body in a year. Her neck smelled like lilacs, and she wore tight-fitting jeans with a blouse Eric had never seen before. She must have actually gone home and showered before coming over. The embrace didn’t last long though and she pulled back in apparent realization that Eric was finding the situation a bit strange, as well as the realization that the situation *was* a bit strange.

Eric said he was great as he lead her into the living room and sat on the couch. “I made some real progress on the story yesterday.”

She sat down on the couch next to him even though there was an open chair not far away. As Sandra crossed her legs in a way that rotated her far shoulder towards him, Eric let her aroma fill his head. The heat of the courtyard was present and pumping through him, and his headache became a fever.

“I’m sorry if I acted strange on Monday.” Sandra looked down and folded her hands on her lap. “I just think we both know how weird this is—me coming here, us being together so often.”

“Yeah, but,” Eric said, “but I wouldn’t even be able to keep pictures of you anymore, I’d have to toss out that old bed if I knew I wasn’t going to see you and hear you every week.” Sandra looked up and her expression was refined, they held eye contact before she answered.

“It really is just so good,” she said, “that you’re writing again. I miss that part of you.”

The fever swam through Eric’s head; she smelled like grass on a cold summer night.

He moved in and their lips touched, slowly and softly, before their coarser tongues began to dance and flick. They made love on the couch, lying on their sides with Eric behind her, clutching her chest as their hips moved. When she climaxed Sandra screamed and blindly reached back to grab Eric’s hair. Pulling it towards her own, their heads touched and his legs flushed with orgasm. They stayed in that position even after they finished, laying silent for a little while.

Sandra lay on Eric’s sprawled out arm with her eyes closed, and his other arm was still wrapped around her chest. “Those last two years,” she said, “How did we not do that once for two whole years?”

Eric thought back. “Thorazine,” he said.

“Right,” she said as if accepting a fact of the world.

“This was better than before.”

“Yeah,” she said in a daze, “Maybe.”

Eric looked down at her. “I’m not the same as before, you know.”

“No,” she said twisting her head back, “But I think you can get there.”

Eric pulled back his arm that was holding her to him and placed it behind his head so that he could feel the bristly hair between his fingers. This was not the hair that Sandra had intended to reach for a few minutes ago. He realized that them fucking had just been conditional—on the condition that he either was, or was becoming “Old Eric.”

“I can tell you miss him,” Eric said.

“What?”

“Old Eric. Writer Eric.” Sandra lay still for a moment before rolling off the couch and grabbing her underwear off the floor.

“Do you love me?” Eric asked, trying to interrupt her pulling on her pants and blouse, “Or do you love me because I’m writing? Because I remind you of your ex-husband.”

“I don’t know,” she said, finally dressed, tucking her face in her hands which distorted her tired words. “I just loved you,” she said.

Eric froze, as if catatonic yet remained completely aware. “I don’t understand,” he said, trying to ignore the returning haze of the fever that had so graciously left him for a moment.

“What is it you loved? Tell me. Maybe I can still do it, those things you love. I just don’t want to be something that you, just, like, project your sadness onto.”

Sandra took a deep breath and lifted up her reddened face to look at the ceiling, as if doing so would drain some tears from the backs of her eyes. On looking back down, she coughed in order to clear her throat, and her face settled into a familiar look—locked in time, tired.

“Okay, you won’t be,” she said through her half-stuffed nose. “I’m leaving now. And just so you know, this place is a mess.” Sandra turned to leave, but stopped herself and said without looking up, “Maybe I’ll stop by tomorrow and tidy up.” Eric only nodded to avoid opening his mouth. Leaving without another word she shut the door behind her, and the sound of brass clanked and clanked from outside.

Eric walked around the apartment with an unchanging facial expression, turning on lights once the sun went down, and doing other things of little importance. He tried to sit down at his desk a few times but felt like he couldn’t, and as the hours wore on, thoughts of Sandra began to take up a bigger and bigger part of his head. He missed Sandra terribly, as though she had died, as if the Sandra still alive were just a drone who could never again feel the things he felt for her.

Sometime during the night he grabbed the pill case from his desk and took it into the bathroom with him. He hung his head over the toilet, smelling the dull toilet water with its puke associations. Clicking open the three remaining compartments of the case, Eric shoveled the pills into his mouth. The medication needed at least a couple of weeks at steady doses to take effect, but Eric swore he could feel the anti-psychosis moving through his veins and bumping inside his temples. He lay with his head in his arms on top of the rim of the toilet seat, concentrating as hard as he could on sanity, and on holding down the fifteen or so pills which were the only contents of his stomach. But in the end it all came up.

Purged of his medicine Eric stood up, and as the endorphins from his vomiting were released all throughout his body, he went to his desk and he began to write. The name “Dean” appeared on the page many times and as Eric wrote he began to tap into many truths about himself and about his disorder. Eric wrote that he knew the thin film of sanity was falling off of him as if it were falling asleep and losing its grip, revealing something deeper, something like gravity inside him that held everyone in place, and as he wrote, he underwent a strange and total transfusion that pumped him full of context. His pencil in hand flicked away from the paper onto the bed, writing that his body was lying on its side. He knew that he reached over from his side of the bed and drew Sandra’s body across from him. He knew every one of the words he’d write on her paper body which he then held so light in his arms. He knew that if it was actually Sandra he was holding, each soft impression of the pencil would tickle her and she would look on as he wrote, but he also knew it was not her, not yet. He knew that their thin bodies stretched out so that their fingertips touched and nothing else, and that until he finished writing his words, the two of them would stick to the bed in that position, lying still, as silhouettes frozen against the portrait of bed sheets that lay below them.

:

The sound of knuckle on wood woke Eric, who had been asleep at his desk. He looked around for his pill case as the knocks continued, and found it on its side on the tile of the bathroom floor. Blood filled his head as he leaned over and grabbed the case, and on picking it up he found that all of its compartments were open and empty. Eric therefore had no idea what day it was. The knocks persisted until he came and opened the door to find Dean standing just outside.

“May I come in?” Dean asked, as he stuck his head in and looked around. At this moment, it struck Eric that Dean had never been inside his apartment before, but then, his head was still aching and he barely gave this a second thought as Dean entered. With a cool hand on his forehead Eric began to pace up and down the hall between the bedroom and foyer so that flashes of Dean taking off his shoes and then closing the door disappeared and reappeared in his vision.

“What day is it anyways?”

“Eric,” Dean said, grabbing him by the shoulder and stopping his movement. “Try and remember, what did you do yesterday?” Eric considered the question and remembered that he had spoken to Dean and it was in the courtyard, or on the phone? Sometime Sandra had been over, and he remembered that they had made love and done so on the couch. And after that he had written and that’s when he had figured things out. That was We, so today was would be Th, or it could be Fr. Or maybe yesterday was Sa and he just forgot to refill the case. That would make sense, but then he should be in the courtyard today.

“Of course, of course,” Eric said, waving away the issue with his hand. Then he bit his fingernail, unsure what he should tell Dean first. “I need to tell you something. Sandra and I slept together. Friend, I know I can get her back.”

“So you took my advice then and gave the writing a break to concentrate on Sandra, I’m glad. How are you feeling?”

“No, I’ve been writing, I’ve been writing. But man,” Eric said, knocking on his head lightly as if inquiring what was wrong with it, “I’ve got this fever that I can’t kick.”

“Staring at something too long can make anybody go crazy,” Dean said and took a cautious breath. “And what about the Sandra situation?”

“‘The Sandra situation,’” Eric repeated and gave a quick glance back to his room. “It’s not the Sandra situation, or the writing situation, or the pill situation. It’s all one big situation.”

Dean covered his face with his thin white hands. “What do you mean, ‘pill situation?’” he asked, and Eric stared at him for a moment.

“I took the pills, Dean,” he said. “A zillion of them. Then I threw them up, and that’s the thing. I couldn’t write with that stuff inside of me—”

“Why can’t you understand?” Dean’s voice grew. “Sandra is never going to come back to you if you’re not taking your medicine and if you spend all of your time on that silly story.”

“The only reason she fucked me is because I’m writing. She thinks I’m becoming the old me again or something, but I’m not,” Eric said.

“But you can be the old you,” Dean said, his hands now clenched at his sides. “You can be well again and she’ll love you.”

“She’ll love me when she reads my story,” Eric said. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, but no one can hear me yet,” he said taking a step closer. “I have to show her that my mind isn’t worthless. I have to cradle her and she me, and we’ll dream about the future like we used to, I can dream across worlds,” he said.

“It’s pointless!” Dean yelled for the first time in their friendship. “You’re choosing to be a loon. Tell me, what is your story about? Do you even know? I’d bet it’s no more than word salad written in a notebook. So let me see it, then. Show me the yarn of nonsense you’ve spun so I can know what it’s like to be insane.”

They were still standing in the foyer, so when the knocker tapped—even as light as it was—from outside the door, Eric could hear it over their arguing voices. Eric looked over to Dean with his suit and mustache, and his world felt slanted. Drowning in confusion. The words

he had written back in his room were sweeping through the hallway in currents of broken sentences and attempts at empathies, gushing towards him, filling his head up to his eyeballs and tipping gravity on its side. And just before opening the front door, the invisible weight of being watched rested on the back of his neck—perhaps by a great mouth that was droning on behind him, speaking and describing something even larger than himself in a subliminal language that, if only he could understand it, might make sense of this.

Eric opened the door and Sandra came in, kicking off her shoes and aligning them with her feet next to Dean's.

"Hello," Sandra said, extending her hand to Dean while giving Eric a look that was curious for an explanation. "I don't think we've met. I'm Sandra, Eric's ex-wife."

Dean, equally surprised, took her hand and shook it slowly. "Dean."

—Wait—

This can't be what happened. This is not a hallucination, so Sandra shouldn't be addressing Dean. So just wait. What does Eric know right now? He is We, out to find seven or eight noun to hat...hat, hate. For not to stump it in 7, kick my story—no—his hers to find: Su:Mo:Tu. And better, getting no story. But right now, what's hardest to find. So. Even in my head, to make heads or tails of this, I'll have to look, nor here nor there. What is my greatest salad will be your worst, to do something important and dream across the divide. Just in the head my mind, my mind, my mind, my mind, my mind

“Header for New Story” —Eric Winters

In the courtyard Dean and Sarah sat. The air had withered and all felt grey, which was well and good in her flowing white dress and his pressed tuxedo. As they went to hold hands they found there was bone, skeleton stretching the length of themselves. Their brainless skulls clacked against each other like two toasting drinks. All was frozen but not in a stupor, and they sat in silence, wondering about the memories and stories they might share.

A Thought

If we straddle the line between true and false, ambiguities appear and vanish like black holes emanating from a particle collider.

You wonder, what is the value of taking me at my word? If I cradle you against my chest and build a nest inside my head, then it is all you have. That and my eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin. I give them to you freely in hopes that we might learn something.

In the realm of fiction, I stand at the pulpit directing you from place to place, and you trust me because you have to. This world I introduce is completely foreign and new. This is agreed upon. In fiction there's a beginning and an end to this story. If I say "I've never been good with girls," you can trust that I'll come back to it, because we're creating a world. I would not have mentioned it unless it was a defining feature of this world, either big or little. Unless it needed to be there.

In nonfiction the story doesn't begin here and it doesn't end here. Unless, "I've never been good with girls" is a point upon some line of inquiry, it may seem irrelevant and confusing. Our whole conception of nonfiction is that the piece's boundaries don't start or end within itself—that the story doesn't end here.

Fiction allows us to step back and look at something as a whole. We don't see life as in our ability to comprehend—only a creation of man can we look and see for its whole. We associate creation with incompleteness, but only once we deem it nonfiction, as existing in a context larger than itself, does it become truth.

We began on my bed in the darkness, naked of context, and afraid. Now, where does the story end?

I Know Her

I have this snippet of my older sister Jo crying during latchkey after she ran away from all the aides who had tried to ask her what was wrong. It was the day our Uncle Rob died, and she was sitting on the asphalt where it ledged over the grass to the playground. Her punch-stained lips and teary eyes were red in the August afternoon. I don't know if I walked over and patted her back with my little five-year-old hand or just stood and watched. The memory feels distanced. I can't remember if it's always felt this way, or if I've slowly been taking steps back as the years have gone by.

Jo and I had always been close. We used to spend our summers sitting Indian-style on the ground playing Texas Hold 'Em with the windows open and the fan on. When I entered Riverside High School in eighth grade, she had been one of my best friends and my role model—all honors classes, didn't drink, never tried any drugs, and a hard worker.

I wondered if my sister would help with girls, as I harbored secret crushes on about seventy percent of her friends. But those always just seemed like fantasies. My eyes would wander to the breasts of girls in my class. Especially Megan Fisher who I'd imagine changing into a sport's bra for gym. I even had a mental catalogue of which pairs of jeans made her butt look nicest.

Once, Megan came up to me in the last few minutes of English class after packing up her stuff and we talked. "You've got an older sister right?" she'd said. I turned around and saw that a few of the kids she sat next to in class were looking over at us.

I said that I did.

“I saw her with Kaylan Prince at the Lake-County fair,” she giggled, “sucking—” that’s when she lost it. “Sucking his dick. It was right behind the fried pickle stand,” she said, now in tears. “We couldn’t believe it.”

As she sat there laughing I felt the sickness of being kicked in the groin, and I only wanted to either double over or run away. From that point on everything about high school felt upside-down and perverse. Eleventh graders would track me down in the hallways to ask if I’d heard about how she’d gotten fingered by Garret after homecoming. Every day the popular kids would ask me if I could hook them up. What bothered me so much about those self-satisfied punks bringing her up, was that part of me knew that in reality Jo probably would be attracted to these kids who made fun of me. And as high school progressed we spent less and less time together.

I glared at the boys she brought home to “hang out with,” and even though I was small, I used to have fantasies about beating up Matt Terrazino and Ricky Esperance and Justin Rosenberger in my driveway. I wanted to imagine that she didn’t do anything with these guys. But I never asked Jo if any of what I’d heard was true, never asked for permission to change how I looked at her. Soon I started feeling waves of anger every time she wore a low-cut shirt to school so that her bra showed, or even whenever I saw a crumpled-up thong in the dryer. I wouldn’t pick it up; I wouldn’t touch it. I’d shut down—not talk to her for days, even weeks depending on what had sparked it.

So that was high school. The closest I ever got to being with Megan was tucking myself into bed some nights, and masturbating myself to sleep. I used to fantasize that she was my girlfriend. After school we’d lie together on my old couch with the broken recliner, flipping

between HBO and ESPN, having sex for hours because there wasn't anything we'd rather be doing.

But things changed once we got to college. Since the tail end of her graduation, Jo had only one boyfriend, Seth. He was still back home doing construction when she moved down to Ohio State. Then, two years later, I moved down to Columbus too. With Seth gone, and no guy-flirting, and fifty thousand people not caring who Jo was, compared to seven hundred who would never let me forget, it was like getting a best friend back.

On Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, I got us dinner from Burritos Noches up on North Campus. We went to the SEL—Science and Engineering Library—together most weeknights. I remember her showing up with no make-up on, waving to me in her sweatpants and reading glasses. On the weekends she'd buy me beer and then even talk me up to her friends, introducing me to Jenna, Emma, and Stacey. Things with girls just started getting easier.

I remember on the last day of spring quarter freshman year, Jo had been at the table in the SEL watching my stuff as I sprint-walked in my tight Boston Marathon '83 sleep shirt and greasy hair to turn in my Intro to Fiction portfolio. I ran into Brooke Evans—at the time, just a girl from my class—who was standing at our professor's mailbox trying to shove her folder in between the twenty others before the English department closed at five. After successfully cramming in our work and walking out of the office she asked me where I was coming from, and I told her the SEL.

"I spend my life in there," she said.

"No you don't." I held open the door to the stairwell for her. "I own that place. I'd recognize you if you went there even semi-regularly."

She laughed. “No, I should have my own desk there reserved for me.”

“My friends tell me that all the time,” I said. We kept talking, and I didn’t even realize we’d passed the SEL and walked all the way to Lane. I told her I should probably turn around.

She smiled and said, “Maybe I’ll see you next year at my library.”

We each took a few steps in our opposite directions, still waving and holding eye contact. When I got back, Jo was still waiting with my stuff.

“What took you so long?”

“I was just talking to this girl from class.”

“Oooh. A girl, huh?”

“Yep,” I said, “a girl.” She smiled and looked back down to her GRE prep booklet.

The next year Jo was working at the daycare logging observation hours for grad school applications, so I was alone at the library when I began to see Brooke walking around. First we made awkward eye contact from our respective seats, but the next day she asked if I had worked on my story since last quarter. The day after that she asked if it was okay to sit across from me, and I said yes. We studied a little, then whispered for an hour about writing and how crazy it could make us by the time we finished a first draft. I made fun of the three-course meal she slowly unloaded from her book bag with metal silverware and everything. Eating was overrated, I’d said—mostly because I was too afraid of the oven to cook. We met up again the next day, and she brought me broccoli casserole.

I can remember Brooke leaning on the dirtied white tabletops as she stared at her computer, scrunching up her hair and holding it when she was frustrated. She was a natural blonde, and pale like me. Not sickly pale, just a gentle relationship with the sun. Her blue eyes were unlike mine which have been compared, on occasion, to a raccoon’s. Even though she was

a captain of the Swim Club Brooke had a runner's body. Skinny but fit, with strong legs, and a butt that I spent my fair share of time looking at.

I remember the night that I manned-up and finally asked Brooke for her phone number. I'd been telling her I was going to destroy her in Drunk Driver, and that night she finally accepted my challenge and came over. Most of the night is a blur, and I still have no idea who won the drinking game or if we even played. I just remember taking off our shoes and getting under the covers, wiggling in close to each other, face to face. We wrapped our arms around each other's backs, and slept until noon.

We started texting every day after that. I began imagining scenarios of how we would officially start dating—if I'd bring it up casually in library whispers, or maybe take her to out to dinner. I'd seen enough movies to know not to ask her in a text, even though ours' were incredibly long and well thought out. They usually involved me staring at my phone with an absent grin on my face for fifteen minutes at a time, occasionally typing, then staring some more.

"Quite the novel, you're working on," I remember Jo saying with a hint of annoyance once, looking across the table to me at the SEL. It had been a couple of weeks since she and I had met up because of the late-afternoon GRE classes she'd signed up for. At first she pretended to be excited for me when I brought up Brooke, but I could tell that she was getting fed up with it. I knew it was just because she missed Seth, which just bothered me. She had blown me off countless times for guys, and now that I spent a little time with a girl she couldn't just be happy for me?

After reading the text for another minute I said, "I think I'm moving up to the fourth floor with Brooke." Jo had gotten sick up there a few months before and formed a bad association with it or something. I even had to go down to the security desk and ask for a barf bag.

“Fine,” she said, looking back down at her workbook.

At the time, this just annoyed me. If she expected me to weed through her passive aggression, then she was in for a surprise. I wasn’t there to tip-toe around her emotions, or play games, or try to read her mind. That wasn’t my job.

I tucked my notebook and folder under my arm and zipped up my book bag. “Call Seth or something,” I said before turning to walk over to the lobby.

When I made it up there and spotted Brooke’s table, I saw that she was with two guys wearing backwards hats and Swim Club T-shirts. One sat in the seat next to her and the other was across the table. They were all leaned towards each other talking and laughing, so I sat diagonal from her. At that moment more than any other, I couldn’t shake the jealousy off. And sitting silently with my laptop open and my arms crossed, I felt like I was in high school again.

Later that night when I walked down the stairs, I stopped at the second floor’s door and looked through its thin rectangular window. Sometimes when Jo studies she hunches and leans forward, bringing her arms into her body so that she’s as small as possible. I watched her sit hunched for a minute, only straightening her posture to click the phone next to her textbook and then immediately return to reading.

I realize now that I didn’t get even with Jo that night. I ditched her. And in high school, whatever she did or didn’t do with guys was none of my business. Despite anything I had heard or seen over the years, I never had a right to be mad at her. I’m still not ready to say this out loud to Jo I don’t think, but still, I know it’s true. I know it whenever we’re eating our second round of shitty burritos together, sitting across from each other at two in the morning.

*

I asked Brooke to come to my twentieth birthday. She said her friend Ryan was coming into town that night, she couldn't make it.

"Your friend?" I said.

"Yeah," she said turning back to her laptop, "my friend."

The year before, when I was a freshman, I hadn't met too many people by the time my birthday came around, and everyone from high school had told me they couldn't come visit. Jo said we could just do a small thing with her and her roommates, and then surprised me at her apartment with all of my friends there. I apparently tried to kiss two of her neighbors who had stopped by that night, each by asking them if I could. I don't picture it as that stock scene where our heads were leaned close together, foreheads nearly touching, sharing a silence filled not with awkwardness, but with energetic contentedness, anticipation, and hunger, and I whisper "Can I kiss you?" No, I'll bet I talked over the music to them about their major while being totally lost as to what the next step was, eventually asking them if they wanted to make out. My memory starts coming back around four-thirty after everyone had left, and I was crying to Jo about how alone I was. I told her how all I wanted was someone to lean her head on my shoulder while we watched a movie together on the couch. That was my nineteenth birthday. My twentieth was also at my sister's apartment, but this time I had a lot more Grey Goose and none of my high school friends came. My OSU friends, who I'd made later my freshman year, didn't stop by until very late, after they were done with other parties. Around four in the morning after everyone had gone besides Jo and Seth, I walked down from the bathroom hollering about how I was halfway to being famous because I was the twenty-year-old virgin. I told my sister that she never had any problem with that, did she? I could eye-witness attest to it. I did not stop and my voice continued to rise over the course of a few minutes. She was crying and telling me to leave, but I wouldn't.

She tried to push me towards the door, and I shoved her back. She hit the floor, still crying; Seth took one step towards me and hit me with his forearm hard, throwing me back so that my head smacked against the corner of the wall dividing the living room from the kitchen, and then there was black.

Antiseptic. A single, man-sized lamp leaned over my bed, so that shadows from its retractable edge-guards rippled across the sheets I was tucked under. My waist was free from elastic pressure, leaving my genitals to sit loose in between my legs. Reaching up to my scalp, I felt cold staples lining the back of my head, some smooth, others sticky with blood-crusting hair. Everything smelled like rubbing alcohol and plastic. Holding my wrist nearer to the light I scanned my cryptic medical bracelet, and found “Ian” and “Moeckel.” These were words that made sense. I knew who I was—I played soccer in high school. I had a 4.0, no, almost a 4.0 since coming to college. I developed good study habits from avoiding my roommates and guys from the floor; I often went to the Science and Engineering Library.

I was surrounded by wispy curtains with white mesh at the top. There might have been more people in the room, or maybe I was in one of those hallways lined with a system of curtains—rows of people, sick and bloody. I tried to remember anything at all. I moved my forearm over my eyes, and I could feel my lips jerking. I breathed through my teeth for a minute or two before settling my breath into a rhythm, and falling back to sleep.

“Tell me the fucking truth,” I said. The music from downstairs was faded, and the look on Brooke’s face seemed overwhelmed. But it couldn’t be as overwhelmed as I felt. To say I was

upset when her roommate Jess told me that Ryan was her boyfriend would be a bit of an understatement, and to say I was drunk at the time would be too.

“Ian,” she said, “what do you want me to say?”

“That you’re leading me on.” I was on the verge of drunken tears. “You slept in my bed.”

“I talk to you more than I talk to him.”

I was leaned against the wall at the top of the stairs, trying to hold it together more for her sake than for the ten or so people in line for the bathroom down the hall. My roommates and I were having a house party, which was a familiar scene.

“What is that supposed to mean to me?” I said. “You have a boyfriend.”

“Jess shouldn’t have said that.” Brooke stood with her arms crossed, looking at the wall. “Ryan and I both knew when he graduated that things would be different, and that we didn’t want to hold each other back.”

“Jess said I shouldn’t pursue you. Is that what you want?”

She tightened her lips and looked away from me. “No.”

Jess came over from the bathroom and stood behind Brooke. The group of guys she had walked through was looking at me, and I could feel that my face was flushed. I reached up to the back of my head and lay my palm on the freshly-unstapled scar, took a deep breath.

“Do you want to go somewhere quieter?” I asked Brooke.

Brooke turned to Jess.

“Matt’s party?” Jess said.

Brooke had to go.

I nodded and kept myself composed long enough for her to leave. Afterwards I found one of the warm Keystone cases, took it into my room, and over the next twenty minutes stacked up

my own little can pyramid while leaving Jo furious, venting voicemails with the phone in my other hand.

I took a deep breath. I'd be okay. When I went to the SEL the next day, I'd see Brooke. She'd pull out her pencil case and notebook. She always had to color-code a detailed itinerary of that particular visit's activities, usually spending as much time writing them down as actually doing them. I'd steal her shoe with my feet, and we'd tousle our legs under the table while above, trying to make it seem like we were still studying.

"The voice-message mailbox you have reached is full."

I kicked over the pyramid.

Sinking into the bed, I sat down and rubbed my eyes, "Fuck." I still hadn't seen Jo since my birthday. The only communication we'd had was a long text I'd gotten from her three days after: *I don't want to sound like I'm lecturing, but you were out of control at my apartment, screaming and being crazy. You tripped over the beer pong table and hit your head on the wall. There's a blood stain in the carpet that won't come out. I don't think you should drink anymore.*

And that was it. No "How's your head? Sorry my beer pong table gave you minor brain damage." During her first year away at school, she used to come home after not seeing me for two weeks and yell, "Brosef!" advancing for a hug she knew I would avoid. Now, three weeks had passed, or close to it. But no, that was all she'd said.

My memory had been shit since the accident. Nothing got in correctly. Whenever I tried to read, I'd be cloaked in a hazy awareness that I was tripping through short-term memory, losing sentences fragments like my brain had holes in its pockets. I had even stayed up until two

o'clock studying for neuroscience one night, but the professor ended up handing me back my first "C." It was just a quiz, but still.

Brooke and I were texting, but I noticed that she was taking longer and longer to get back to me. The shitty feelings I got from that, in combination with my fruitless attempts at studying, made me realize that I was only going to the SEL hoping to see her.

One night, after waiting at the library from six until nine-thirty with my phone motionless on the table, I flipped open my laptop and typed in "Ryan" into Brooke's database of friends. Three profiles with their pictures next to them came up. I spotted Brooke right away. Ryan Masterson. They were at some sort of summer camp, and he was making an overly serious face at the camera while giving Brooke a piggy-back ride. She leaned over the back of his shoulder, smiling, with her arms around his chest.

Ryan was a tall guy with bigger ears that made him look a little goofy, but he was strong. Not cut-up or anything, but he could definitely take me. That night I spent over an hour looking through the rest of Ryan's pictures, clicking on the ones of him and her together.

When Brooke and I did meet up, I'd always bring up the status of our relationship, even though it never went anywhere, just her telling me again that she liked both me and Ryan, and that this was a confusing time in her life. Sometimes I mentioned it just to hear her say she liked me, and refer to me as a "crush."

What I really wanted was to be invited over to her apartment, maybe rent a movie or something, but she always had Swim Club or a dinner night with Jess. She seemed to be avoiding me outside the library, which left me feeling like a tumor just barely pushing up against the reward center in her brain, thus leaving her only indifferent to acknowledging the problem. The only times she would meet up was when we were both drunk, and even then only twice, with

Jess there to yank her away at the end of the night. One of those nights on my way home from a party I found myself stumbling towards Jo's place, and then sitting down in front of her door.

My back was up against the brick and I rested my head on it, askew to avoid putting pressure on the scar. The knocker of her door had been busted off, but for the first time I noticed that she had a doorbell. It had been painted over the same color as the frame, cracked around the button where it had been pushed in.

My fingers felt huge as I tried to type into my phone: *Wahhtosdio im outaide*. I called her after, but she didn't pick up.

In my neuroscience class later that week, my Aussie professor was telling us about these things called flashbulb memories. "Where were you on 9/11?" He'd asked the class. Like this and the shot heard 'round the world, the memories were defined by intense emotion and the uncanny confidence people have in their accuracy—especially the little details. The irony that little details were exactly the things I couldn't remember these days, was not lost on me.

"It can be 9/11 or something else, but take one of these memories and write down as many details as you can."

I turned over my notes to the blank white side and thought for awhile, eventually writing down, "skin-colored pants," "orange portable phone," and "spring snow."

We had been driving home after school. It was a Tuesday—the day neither Mom nor Dad got home till six—which usually meant Jo and I going to Blockbuster to exchange for movies that would be super-awkward to watch with one of them meandering in, as they liked to do. But Jo informed me that Seth would be coming over. Without taking her eyes off the road, she grabbed in between the driver and passenger seats for a Jollyrancher and then put it in her mouth.

I asked her why. She had only known him for a week. It was so he could see her in her prom dress, she told me, and I looked just looked out the window as we pulled into our driveway. Seth walked in the door at two-thirty, clapping his feet on the mat and jogging up the stairs two at a time. I had been downstairs watching tennis, and from there I could hear Jo's door creak closed.

The window was open because it was warm, and outside I could see the last few brittle patches of snow lining the edge of the driveway. Seth's Dodge Ram 2500 was parked on the lawn, and it stayed that way for half an hour.

Ten more minutes passed. It was three-fifteen, and her door stayed shut.

Then I began calling the home phone with my cell. Sitting there, the only light in the house was what came through the windows, and I listened to the five uninterrupted rings of the phone. Then moving up to my living room sofa, I leaned over the back of it to look through the foyer doorway, up the stairs, just in front of Jo's room. I called again.

The portable phone startled me as it came to life right next to my ear. Jo's door swung open and there were two bare legs, in portrait-view. A layered and mechanical, Hello, sounded in my ears. "Hello?" Jo's voice drifted from the top of the stairs.

I let go of the phone and walked out the front door. I yelled the word whore as loud as I could. I felt sick and sad. I didn't cry.

"Midterm's on Thursday," the professor said, walking over to pack his papers into his briefcase. "So don't forget."

For the next few days, I found myself thinking more and more about my birthday and about the incident that led to my injury. The combination of drinking and the head injury had prevented the doctors from being able to pinpoint whether my memory loss of the event was due

to a blackout or amnesia. Finally, when Jo called me back, and we asked how the other was doing after so long, I got to ask her about it.

“I,” she said. “Maybe it’d be better if you just came over to talk about it.” Her tone sounded frustrated, and I could picture her rubbing her eyebrows with her thumb and forefinger. “Next Friday.”

That was the night of Brooke’s birthday. Ryan was going to be there, but for some reason she had still invited me. I told Jo I could probably come over. “There’s this weird thing with Brooke that night though.”

“Don’t worry, this won’t take long.”

“I could just skip it if you wanted.”

“No,” she said. “you should go.”

“Alright,” I said. “So did you end up getting my voicemails?”

“I did,” she said. “Look, I’m sorry, I can’t talk right now. I’m just so backed up with homework.”

I tried to remember when we’d last studied together. It felt like months. “Are you SEL-ing it? I didn’t ask Brooke,” I said. “Actually, I’m getting the feeling that she’s avoiding me outside of the library.” That was the first time I’d said that out loud. “If she doesn’t want to see me—”

“Ian?” she said. “Ian? No, I’m not going to make it to the SEL.”

I said okay, and then went to click the End button, but heard something as I took the phone away from my ear.

“Wait, Ian.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you ring my doorbell like a million times the other night?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “No.”

“Me and Seth didn’t want to get out of bed, figuring it for some drunk asshole. But it woke up Megan. She was pissed because she had to work at six-thirty.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You texted me that night,” she said. “I didn’t see it until morning.”

“My bad. I won’t text you again.”

“Ian.”

“What?” I asked, listening to the soft white noise in the receiver.

“Nothing.”

“Kay.”

I hit the End button and walked over to my desk, putting my head down in front of the computer.

It was Thursday night, so I felt there were only two options for me. I texted Brooke and asked if she was hittin’ the brary tonight or going out, not expecting a response.

The phone buzzed back almost instantly, *Already drinking ;).*

I had never been to her apartment before, so when Brooke texted me the address and I typed it into Google Maps while throwing back swigs of Kraken like a sailor, I was surprised to see that her complex was no more than a hundred yards from Jo’s. So I figured I’d just go there and then orient myself to Brooke’s.

There was this row of trees down 16th that smelled like horrible, weird cheese—Jo had once called them period-trees, which I’d pretended not to hear. I had to walk through them to get to the alley by her apartment, but once I entered, it smelled like autumn again and the breeze

whisked by me. The last door of the building was my sister's. I was walking with my hands in my pockets when it opened and Jo walked out. She had her purse around her shoulder and a brace on her right wrist—no book bag. I stopped where I was, moving slowly to lean against the crumbled brick wall. The splint looked new, and Seth came out afterwards pulling the door closed behind him. In high school, I used to wonder whether any of Jo's boyfriends had ever hit her. Once she dated a drug dealer from the grade above me and I used to imagine her coming home with a black eye. The image alone would infuriate me, send me into a daydream of Jo trying in vain to hold me back as I walked over to the guy who did it and beat him until he knew to stay away the rest of his life.

Jo was laughing, and she play-hit Seth's chest as they stepped off the curb onto the parking lot. He grabbed her ass, and she gave him a look that said, "Watch it, mister." But no, that was what she wanted.

The first thing I did when I found Brooke's apartment was pound a shot. She'd handed me one as soon as I walked in, but I was going to do it anyways. It was only me, Brooke, Jess, and another kid named Ian who Jess had invited. We played Fuck the Dealer for half an hour, talking over the rap music and adjourning for shot breaks every few minutes. While we were in the kitchen, post-shot, Brooke grabbed a Cutie sticker from a crate of clementines and stuck it on my sweater.

It was three-thirty in the morning when I looked over to the couch and saw Jess and Ian had gone in Jess's room. I told Brooke I should see her bedroom, slurring about how impolite it was that she hadn't given me a tour. Her bed ended up not having any sheets on it, and after realizing this she covered her face in embarrassment. I turned the lights off, which didn't do anything for the light from the window, but I said, problem solved.

We lay down on the bed and forked our knees together as she rested her head under mine, and I spoke into her hair. “This is the first time tonight it’s actually quiet,” I said without expecting an answer. “My sister is a whore.”

Brooke didn’t say anything, but I could tell she hadn’t fallen asleep by the still-steady rhythm of her heartbeat tapping through the material of her shirt. “Mm,” she eventually acknowledged.

“She’s a liar,” I said. “And a hypocrite, judging me for drinking.”

When she didn’t answer, I readjusted. Eventually she tucked herself further into my arms. I wondered if there were any pictures of her and Ryan hanging on the wall, or tacked onto a corkboard collage somewhere, keeping my eyes closed the whole time. I smelled her scalp.

With her blond hair scratching across my chin, Brooke lifted her face level with mine. She reached back and grazed the scar on the back of my head with her fingertips. “Ian,” she said. “You’re in college. You’re supposed to drink.”

I squeezed her tight, and then kissed her. She kissed me back. The friction in our jeans slowed down our hips, gyrating in and out, and after a minute her hand found my fly and she started massaging. I slid my own hand down under her tight, buttoned jeans, deep enough to feel the bristles in between her legs. She stopped rubbing me and grabbed my hand.

“Let’s do it,” I said, and we breathed into each other’s mouths.

“Next week,” she said.

I reached out with my lips to kiss her as I pulled off my jeans. She didn’t stop kissing as her hand found its way down to my erection. I smiled. She pecked at my lips a few times before moving down between my thighs, licking so that I could feel the cold air. Looking up, she wrapped her mouth around me, and began bobbing up and down.

I was too drunk to finish, but I didn't care. After crawling back up, we made out more, and then at some point positioned ourselves for sleep, she using my arm as a pillow. It fell asleep, and then I did.

Weeks had passed since I'd calmed Jo down about the GRE. The second time she took it I had rolled out of bed and walked her to the testing station at six-thirty in the morning. But now I couldn't remember if she had scheduled to take it again.

Brooke and Jess had had swimming the morning after I slept over, so I rolled out of bed and jumped into my clothes pretty early. "I'll text you when I'm done," she'd told me as I stood outside her apartment.

But when I woke up hours later and clicked my phone, all I saw was the time—5:19 pm. I texted her something that played on the fact that I'd had to make the walk of shame, but even after showering, eating breakfast with the sunset, and walking myself to the SEL, I got no answer.

Once there, it pissed me off firstly how ineffective any attempts at reading my textbook were, but it pissed me off even more that academics meant so relatively little to me now. Even with the Psych midterm approaching, the only thing I cared about was Brooke—just feeling the weighty depression of wondering why she hadn't texted me back after last night, which was so good. Sitting with my open textbook in front of me, I flipped through the pages and noticed the section on flashbulb memories, and went through a few paragraphs. According to the book, flashbulb memories weren't actually very accurate—the confidence was an illusion. I must have been too busy writing to hear my professor say that in class. I had assumed that the point of the

exercise was accessing emotions that tied us to our past, but it was actually about showing us that they were wrong. But how could an emotion be *wrong*?

I grabbed my Psych notes from my folder and then scanned over the scene I had scribbled on the back. I wanted to forget it—the truck, the legs, everything—but I couldn’t even stop reading it. I didn’t understand how she could do that to me. How could she forget me like that? She was just my big sister. I was the victim here. Wasn’t I? I wondered if it was possible, and to what extent my emotions had been blowing everything out of proportion.

I continued reading it up until the midnight when I decided it was time to leave. All those times I looked at it, even though all of the details felt seared into my brain, I didn’t trust myself to change anything—didn’t even cross out my adverbs.

A long time after getting home, I lay in the dark of my room and it was four a.m. My socks had been peeled off and thrown at the hamper forty minutes ago, but I was still restless from only being up for eleven hours.

My phone lit up on the side table, and I rolled over to grab it. It was Brooke: *If you don’t want to talk to me anymore after this, I totally understand.* I stopped right there, only for a moment. *I told Ryan about what happened between us last night and he and I decided we want to stay together. I know this sucks. I really do like you, but I know you want a real relationship, and after last night, I realized that’s something I can’t give you.*

I took the pillow from under my head and pressed my face into it. That morning after returning from Brooke’s—less than twenty-four hours ago—I had stretched across this mattress, basking in the freedom I felt from switching between shared twin bed to a vacant double. “God,” I moaned. “God damn it.”

I cried a little bit, unable to figure out what I had done wrong, and then texted her back:

All I'm going to say is that I'm here. I don't know where you think it's going between you two. You're not from the same area, are you saying you want to move in with him after you graduate? I am obviously biased, but knowing you, it seems like a long-distance relationship isn't what you want. And I'm here. Either way, it's sort of moot because I'll have already forgotten what you said by the time I finish typing this message. So unless you want to keep having to make this decision I know you don't believe in, and not fulfill the binding verbal contract you made with me...I uh, I guess you'll, um—either way, I'm just glad you're single.

By myself, in the early morning dark, I waited for the buzz. She'd said hahaha, that's an interesting memory I've got—remembering an offer she'd made hammered drunk, and then forgetting something I just read. I told her that I hadn't the slightest clue what she was talking about, and that I didn't make the rules of memory, I just followed them.

And everything was back to normal.

The fluorescent white light from the phone illuminated my dark bedroom once again, and then, after a moment, only a spot on the folds of the blanket it was resting against. Pulling up my covers, I rolled to my other side without bothering to read what she wrote, for the first time not caring that I had gotten such a quick response.

That night I dreamed about standing in the old schoolyard, and an asphalt parking lot, a few times. But every time I awoke, I lay there in the dark, half-asleep, only knowing Brooke's drunk self from her sober self, waiting for next week.

“If she chose him, man, it's over. You're going to get hurt.” That's what my friends said when they found out the situation Brooke and I were in. “If I was just a fling, she wouldn't have

told Ryan about us. She tried to make a firm decision, but it's not going to hold. I know she wants to be with me," is what I would say back.

We kept texting that week, but it hurt. My phone started feeling peaceful when it sat motionless in my pocket, instead of empty like it used to. Typing her responses felt like picking the scab on the back of my head—well, not picking really, just feeling it. Rubbing my finger over the ragged skin to feel the sweet pain, from someplace I'd never really had pain before.

I told Brooke how horrible of an idea I thought going to the party was. "Do you want him to hit me in the face?" I'd said. "You're organizing a boxing match." But she said that as long as I didn't act like a fucking idiot, nothing would happen. He didn't know what I looked like. It would just be a chill party. I kept on insisting that it was a bad idea, but once she'd told me he didn't know who I was, I knew I'd go.

When I went to the SEL I didn't bother inviting anyone, and after I looked online and saw that I'd failed my Psych midterm, I stopped going all together. Jo had called a couple times. I didn't deliberately ignore her, but when I saw the missed calls I just couldn't call her back. I wouldn't have known what to say.

When Friday came around I actually hadn't had anything to drink by the time Brooke started getting adamant about me coming to the party. I knew I was going to go see Jo anyways, so I figured I'd stop there before the party. *What if I said that Ryan doesn't even hang out with me at parties?* was the last straw before I told her I was on my way.

I walked up in front of Jo's apartment and peered over at Brooke's closed door, outside of which a few people had already congregated, and then spotted Seth's truck in the parking lot. Jo's door was unlocked so I went inside and saw them watching TV on the couch. Jo lifted

herself up from leaning on Seth's shoulder, turning it into a stretch. She was right; there was a bloodstain on the carpet, spreading out from the wall like a puddle.

She asked me how my head was and I said it was fine. We forced more small talk for a few minutes, but eventually fell silent.

"Listen, the night of your birthday," she said, walking over and leaning on the back of one of the busted up wooden dining room chairs, "you were out of control."

"I know," I said, still looking at the bloodstain, wondering how long they'd left me there unconscious. "I'm a degenerate."

She shrugged. "I thought you should know that you pushed me to the ground that night." She raised her hand with the skin-colored brace wrapped around it. She told me I was the reason she had it, and then crossed her arms without locking her right wrist under her elbow.

"No," I said, knocked back, "I've never hit you before in my life."

Jo fiddled with her earring and turned away from me without answering. Then Seth lumbered over from the couch and sat down at the table. There was a box of Cheeze-Its on the table that he picked up and started looking over the nutritional facts. My pocket buzzed through the silence, and a small white rectangle glowed from my pocket.

"Is that Brooke?" Jo asked.

"I don't know."

Seth looked up at her like she had just broken script. He set the box back down on the table and said, "I shoved you into the wall after you pushed her." His arm leaned over the edge of the tabletop. "That's what she wants to tell you."

I reached up behind my head and ran my fingers along the length of the scar.

“I did listen to those voicemails you left me about Brooke. You were very mad at her,” she said. “Ian, you need to stop drinking before someone else gets hurt.”

“This whole time,” I said, as my anger washed away all my supposed guilt. “you couldn’t have answered one of my calls.”

She didn’t respond.

“No,” I said. “You were too busy getting your ass grabbed to study with me. You were too busy running around upstairs naked with every guy in school.”

“I am not a bad person. I wasn’t bad in high school.” She stepped out from behind Seth. “If anything, I was prude for a while.”

“Shut up,” I said, coming forward. Jo shrunk behind Seth. Whatever fortitude she’d had a moment ago was gone, leaving only the look of fear on her face.

In my pocket the numbing vibrations of a call started to go off and Seth flicked his eyes down to it. The whole time he hadn’t moved a finger, and Jo was still behind him, hands on his back like they wouldn’t be at ease anywhere else.

“I,” I said. “I need to go.”

The party was mostly people from Swim Club, so I quickly pinpointed Brooke as the only person I knew. When I got to her I hugged her.

“Finally you made it,” she said, straightening her bra straps as we let go of each other. She led me by the hand to the keg for keg-stands, and afterwards in between turns at the beer pong table, I rested my hand below her waist and felt her leaning into me. I didn’t care that Ryan was supposedly there. After the game she went to mingle with a group who had just walked in and I found the other Ian who was the friend of Jess.

“I didn’t know Brooke had a boyfriend, dude,” he said before taking a few gulps from his solo cup. His eyes were watery as he composed himself and then started laughing, “You’ve got balls coming here. I think that’s awesome.”

“He hasn’t even talked to Brooke since I’ve been here,” I said. “The guy’s a tool.”

Ian nodded his head and furrowed his brow, as if to say, “Of course, of course.”

I looked around to see if I could spot Ryan—looked for his goofy ears, and serious face—and then realized Ian had left, so I sipped my Natty at the entrance of the hallway, a few feet away from where Brooke had put the Cutie sticker on me. Down the hallway I saw Brooke’s black dress that came down just to the top of her thighs, and she was leaning against her bedroom door. She had Ryan by the collar. Using her free hand, she pulled a key from her bra and opened the door. A smile was on her face like someone with bad intentions and she looked down the hall to me, and we made eye contact. She didn’t remove the smile, looked back up to Ryan, and walked him into the room, locking the door behind her.

I stood there, staring at the dirty carpet bristles beneath the crack of her door, and all I could smell was perfume and college mold like hot breath. I floated over to the couch, sitting down and watching a sea of waists move in front of me. My beer was gone. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I clicked the keypad and a poorly pixilated jungle scene with the time in black numbers appeared. I don’t know what I expected. Who could I talk to? I scanned the room for anyone I knew—Ian—but I couldn’t see him.

When Ryan eventually came out of the room by himself, he had a big smile on his face. I got up, shouldered through the crowd, and then walked right past him. Leaning against the wall opposite Brooke’s door, I took out my phone and texted her, asking why the hell she made me come here, and that I needed to talk to her, open the door. When there was no response I knocked

a few times, and heard, “Can I help you?” come from above me. Up close, Ryan was taller than I thought he’d be—skinny sort of, not as muscular as when he’d been holding up Brooke. He might qualify as lanky.

“I just want to talk to Brooke.”

“She’s busy, man.”

“Oh okay,” I said, turned away from him, and then knocked again.

“Hey,” he said, laughing almost in disbelief. “Back off of her.”

“Dude, I don’t want to talk to you. I need to talk to Brooke.”

“Hey,” he said, tapping me on the shoulder, “who the hell are you?”

“I’m the guy who hooked up with your girlfriend,” I said, and he didn’t push me, or hit me in the face. He looked confused.

“I’m the guy,” I said. “Brooke told you.”

“No,” he said. “No she didn’t.” He stood with his arms crossed and Brooke opened the door from behind him with a bewildered look on her face. Jess had been standing nearby apparently, and she stepped in front of me. She had glitter on her face.

“I think you should go now,” she said.

“Brooke,” I said, “you didn’t...about us?”

Continuing to stand behind Ryan, Brooke didn’t look at me, didn’t say anything.

“Get out of my house,” Jess said, pointing out the door.

I looked to Brooke who had covered her eyes with her hand, and after a moment of party bass and her heavy breathing, she backed up, and then closed the door to her room. After that is just a blur.

I know now that Brooke was never going to leave Ryan—that I never had a chance. Too late though to stop me from ever going to that party, or getting sucker-punched in the gut by one of Ryan's buddies who had been watching the scene from his spot working the keg. It wasn't until the next day that I found out it was Seth, coming to make sure I didn't do something stupid, who had beaten the kid bloody until Ryan punched Seth in the back of the head. And it wasn't for a few months that I heard Brooke had stopped Jess from calling the cops after Seth turned and shoved Ryan straight through her locked door, leaving it swinging by the top hinge. Later that night I remember being cold, and Seth looking over at my scar for a long time without saying anything.

Jo walked up behind Seth and me sitting on the cement curb outside her door. She'd find me there on the cement many nights after that. But that night I sat there, waiting for someone to tell me I was going to be okay and pat me on the shoulder—a hand just out of reach in time and mind.